

Master Blockhead Goes to Sea: A Glimpse into the Experiences of Midshipman Frederick Marryat

Marti Klein

This paper examines the content, history and context of *The Progress of a Midshipman exemplified in the career of Master Blockhead in seven plates & frontispiece*, and its role as an autobiographical vehicle for its creator, Captain Frederick Marryat, a distinguished Royal Navy officer and the author of sea literature. It also depicts the life of a typical midshipman in the Royal Navy, during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. It is not intended to critique Marryat's work, or to compare it to other maritime literature.

Introduction

Captain Frederick Marryat is perhaps best remembered for his works of maritime fiction, primarily naval stories about young gentlemen who “went to sea with white gloves on”.¹ His books were beloved by his readers in both Great Britain and the United States, highly regarded by eminent literary critics such as John Wilson (aka “Christopher North”) of *Blackwood's Magazine*, and a significant influence upon many young men to ship before the mast, including several well-known authors of sea fiction.

A naval career must have been a good choice for Marryat. He quickly rose through the ranks. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in 1812 and assumed his first command in 1815.² Following inheritances of property in 1824 and 1828, he partially retired from the Royal Navy. However, he wrote his first book of maritime (naval) fiction, *The Naval Officer, or Scenes in the Life and Adventures of Frank Mildmay* (1829) (“Mildmay”), while still at sea.

Marryat's chances of promotion were low, especially in peace time. In 1830, when the Admiralty made it clear to Marryat that he would not receive more promotions, he resigned his command. His personal reasons for this decision are unclear,³ but it enabled him to formally adopt what would become a more financially-lucrative career -- writing maritime fiction.

Marryat left behind little in the way of personal autobiographical information. Despite his fame as an author and naval hero, only two full-length biographies and one biographical sketch in a respected biographical collection were written about him at a time “long after [Marryat's] death, when no witnesses were left who could speak with knowledge”⁴: (1) *Life and Letters of Captain Frederick Marryat* (1878), written by his daughter, Mrs. Ross Church (Florence Marryat); (2) David Hannay's book, *Life of Frederick Marryat* (1889); and (3) William O'Byrne's sketch in *A Naval Biographical Dictionary* (1849). Mrs. Church was disappointed that no complete memoir of her father had been written and published shortly after his death in 1848, although his literary colleagues had been thus honored.

A biographical sketch was published in 1831, while he was still alive, in the third volume of Lt. John Marshall's *Royal Naval Biography*, focusing on his naval career.

In 1872, Mrs. Church collected all the information the family still had or could remember about her father's life, “that is, which the family thought it right to publish to the world.”⁵ She wrote that although her father had been a prolific correspondent, most of his letters had been lost or destroyed. Hannay's book is unique because he went to great length to compare Marryat's real experiences to those of the characters in his novels, as well as to other references such as Admiral Cochrane's autobiography. Christopher Lloyd's *Captain Marryat and the Old Navy* (1939) also compared Marryat's real experiences and the prevailing situation in the Royal Navy to his novels, including *Master Blockhead*.

Marryat kept a journal that combined brief, daily log entries of his activities with extended narrative descriptions of certain situations and serious, thoughtful comments on British society and life at sea. He drew on his journal for autobiographical information he included in some of his books.

Marryat admitted that Mildmay was essentially autobiographical. Marryat entered the navy as a midshipman at the same age as Mildmay, for the same reasons, although unlike Marryat, Mildmay came from an affectionate family. Like Marryat, Mildmay was an intelligent, good-natured child, but a “scamp”⁶ lively, had the gift of quick repartee, and was impudent--young, inexperienced, and callous. David Hannay noted that impudence was not a personality characteristic with which Marryat would want to have been associated.

The personal characterization and incidents in Mildmay were instantly recognizable to Marryat’s peers,⁷ resulting in the resentment of many people who recognized themselves in his book, including accusations of exaggeration and prejudice, which Marryat denied.⁸

Mrs. Church believed that either Marryat was the “naval officer” in Mildmay.⁹ The *Edinburgh Review* (October 1830) commented that the book took the place of a nonfiction autobiography,” making its hero the spectator of scenes in which he has himself been engaged.”^{10,11}

Marryat admitted that the book was “materially true.”¹² Overall, there are so many similarities between Marryat and the fictional Frank Mildmay that the book is used in this paper as a surrogate for a nonfiction biography of Marryat.

Since this paper asserts that the life of Master Blockhead represents a typical midshipman in the Royal Navy in 1820, it is important to determine if his description was accurate. While many critics believed that the book exaggerated the amount of brutality to which the men weresubjected, and hence, was “marked by many violations of taste and propriety,”¹³ others, such as Lloyd, believed it to be a truthful depiction of life in the Royal Navy between 1806 and 1821. The activities portrayed in seven of the eight plates do not include scenes of brutality. The plate entitled, “Seeking the Bubble Reputation,” depicts close-contact combat, but in the end, is self-deprecating, realizing that the level of violence depicted in the image was not necessary in real life. Therefore, it may be safely concluded that brutality is not an issue for Master Blockhead.

Biography

Frederick Marryat was born in 1792 into a family known for their intellectual prowess, including literary talent. He was the second son and second child. His father, Joseph Marryat Esq. of Wimbledon House, Surrey, was a Member of Parliament, chairman for the committee of Lloyd’s marine insurance company, colonial agent for Grenada, and the major force behind the passage of legislation abolishing slave-grown sugar¹⁴. His mother was Charlotte Von Geyer of Boston, the daughter of a German immigrant “of good descent”¹⁵ loyal to the British cause. His siblings were accomplished and highly respected.¹⁶

Similar to Mildmay, Marryat’s father was “a gentleman, and a man of considerable property,” but unlike Mildmay, Marryat did not receive preferential treatment from his parents – that was reserved for his older brother, Joseph, who was being groomed to follow in his father’s footsteps. Although Marryat grew up in a financially prosperous family, he enjoyed few of the privileges that a child from such a family normally received. While some of Joseph Marryat’s friends contested his reputation for being stingy, he was too consumed with making a fortune to show affection or pay much attention to his children, with the exception of his eldest

son. He sent his sons to private school, where they were mistreated, as was typical at that time. Fourteen-year-old Frederick complained about having to wear his older brother's hand-me-down clothing.¹⁷ Hannay referred to it as his "great grievance."¹⁸

As a child, Marryat was frequently flogged for not paying attention in class and similar offenses. He ran away from home and school several times. Although the Marryats were not a seafaring family, Mrs. Church, wrote, "Indeed, at this period of his life, he appears to have considered 'running away' to be his mission, and most conscientiously endeavoured to fulfill his destiny by doing so whenever he could find an opportunity, and the place he ran to—the Eldorado of his imagination, was invariably the sea!"¹⁹.

Marryat grew up a short distance from the Navy Office and commercial shipping wharves lining the Pool of London including those of the Indiamen, listened to his father talk about shipping, and, having been born the year war was declared against France, heard the stories of battles, shipwrecks, and privateers that are exciting to young boys.

In 1805, he witnessed the funeral procession for Nelson.²⁰ It is not known if he thought about going to sea at an early age or read any sea literature, but the grand funeral procession might have turned his thoughts to the sea. However, in retrospect, in his 1841 book for children, *Masterman Ready or the Wreck of the "Pacific,"* Marryat used the title character to admit that it may not have been the romance of a naval career that truly motivated him to go to sea.²¹

Hannay agreed, believing that he was escaping from a cold father and a cruel schoolmaster. Each time he ran away, his father would find him and bring him home. After completing school, Marryat studied with a private tutor, but continued to run away. His father finally had enough, and decided that the sea might be a better place for his son, so in September 1806, at the age of fourteen, Marryat entered the Royal Navy as a midshipman. Young men desiring a naval career either attended the Royal Naval College in Portsmouth before going to sea at age seventeen or joined the navy at age fourteen as a First-Class Volunteer. His father, desiring to find his son a position away from home to make room for his growing number of children, made the latter, more convenient choice. He used his influence at Lloyds to secure a berth for his son aboard the 38-gun frigate, H.M.S. *Impérieuse*, commanded by Captain Lord Cochrane, bound for the Mediterranean. Cochrane was a brave, experienced, knowledgeable, and humane man, so Marryat was lucky to be under his command.

Marryat wrote,

On my return home I stated verbally to my father and mother, as I had done before by letter, that I was resolved to go to sea. My mother wept, my father expostulated. I gazed with apathy on the one, and listened with cold indifference to the reasoning and arguments of the other; a choice of schools was offered to me, where I might be a parlour border, and I was to finish at the university, if I would give up my fatal infatuation. Nothing, however, would do; the die was cast, and for the sea I was to prepare.

What fool was it who said that the happiest times of our lives is passed at school? There may, indeed, be exceptions, but the remark cannot be generalised. Stormy as has been my life, the most miserable part of it (with very little exception) was passed at school...

The circumstance of my going to sea affected my father in no other way than it interfered with his domestic comforts by the immoderate grief of my poor mother. I had an elder brother who was intended to have the family estates, and who was then at Oxford

receiving an education suitable to his rank in life, and also learning how to spend his money like a gentleman. Younger brothers are, in such cases, just as well out of the way, particularly one of my turbulent disposition: a man-of-war, therefore, like *another piece of timber*, has its uses. My father paid all the bills with great philosophy, and made me a liberal allowance for my age.²²

In June 1815, peace ensued in Britain, so Marryat devoted himself to learning about the sciences, hoping to join a scientific expedition. He traveled throughout Europe, gathering scientific information which he thought might be useful to the Admiralty, after which he retired to his father's estate, where he invented a code of signals that would become the basis for the first International Code in 1837. He considered undertaking a journey to "Tombuctoo" but in 1818, when the opportunity presented itself, he turned it down but decided against it in favor of wooing (and then marrying) Catherine Shairp, daughter of Sir Stephen Shairp, Knt., who served Britain twice as the British *Chargé d'Affaires* at the court of Russia and as the Consul-General to Russia. Aspects of the journey may also have influenced him.²³

Courting a woman was costly, and his father gave him a very small allowance. Marryat displayed a talent for drawing caricatures since childhood, so he turned to producing satirical sketches to earn money. His sketches were engraved by his friend, well-known caricaturist and engraver George Cruikshank, and sold as collections. Cruikshank's biographer, Robert Patten, referred to Marryat as "a kind of alter ego" for the Cruikshank brothers because they longed for the type of naval career he led.²⁴

Together, they produced several expertly drawn and etched plates about British culture and politics, some of which were biting satirical, detailed commentaries. More than one caricature featured Marryat himself, including the most popular publications in the series, *The Progress of a Midshipman exemplified in the career of Master Blockhead*.²⁵

The Plates

During the winter of 1819-1820, Marryat used his naval experience to create a series of eleven watercolor sketches following the progress of a young midshipman. This format, which originated in the Middle Ages, included a series of engravings following a person's progress. Many were moralistic or based on famous persons, but Marryat's sketches were autobiographical, based on his personal experiences, uncomfortable and otherwise, and the illustrations of the young man resembled Marryat's physical features. British Museum curator M. Dorothy George noted that this illustration of Master B. was a "recognizable portrait of Marryat," and that the plates are "filled with authentic detail."²⁶

Cruikshank added the frontispiece and heavily edited the sketches to make them more comic and dramatic. He added small amounts of text and exaggerated parts of the illustrations to bring out the story's meaning while downplaying the autobiographical aspect of the narrative.

The plates are unusual in the class of naval literature because they contain several quotations from revered poets and lyricists. Some were attributed to their authors, while others consisted of one line of a verse without an attribution. Cruikshank brought an intellectual dimension to the plates, adding the verses, as well as the books in the second plate.

Marryat wanted to add more plates depicting topics such as press gangs, storms, and morning watch, but together with Cruikshank, they decided that the progression, beginning with the young man embarking on his career, and ending with the same young man, being promoted to lieutenant, was more effective.

Their product, entitled, *Midshipman Blockhead, The Progress of a Midshipman exemplified in the career of Master Blockhead in seven plates & frontispiece*, follows the adventures and misadventures of young Master Blockhead, from the time his family outfitting him to enter the Royal Navy as a midshipman, to his promotion ten years later to the rank of Lieutenant. First published in 1820 by C. Humphrey of London, it was republished in 1835 as a series of ten plates in a different format, including three plates that had been left out of the 1820 publication.

The following describes the original published versions of the plates, analyzes the situation and objects, and compares the illustrations to the real life of Marryat and/or to characters in his novels, notably *Mildmay*. Marryat's original watercolor sketches and Cruikshank's studies are in the holdings of the British Museum. The final artwork for the plates are held by the National Maritime Museum

A complete set of the original published plates could not be located for use in this paper. Therefore, the plates shown are those published in 1835. Any significant differences between the two versions are noted in the text accompanying each plate.



The **frontispiece** (illustration facing the title page) introduces the reader to the principal themes of Master Blockhead's story. Curator's notes from the British Museum describe it as follows:

...A sailor in a small boat battles against the wind and stormy waters, looking fearful as he struggles towards an obelisk-like rock upon which is a precarious pavilion – a Temple of Fame where a number of naval officers, distinguished by their cocked hats, are gathered. The winged figure blowing a trumpet from the top, laurel crown in hand, embodies the fame that the sailors clambering up the rock are hoping to achieve.

Unfortunately, another sailor who has tried yet failed in his quest for fame is swept away by the sea – a warning, perhaps, that ambitious young seamen pursue fame and glory at their peril.”²⁷

The image might have been based on the first verse of the sixteenth century poem, *Sir Richard Grenville’s Farewell, On His Sailing for Foreign Parts in the Year 1585: A Ballad in Praise of Seafaring Men*:

Who seeks the way to win renown,
Or flies with wings of high desire,
Who seeks to win the laurel crown,
Or hath the mind that would aspire,
Let him his native soil eschew,
Let him go range, and seek a new.^{28,29}

Any young man who would undertake such a dangerous journey must have been adventurous, seeking glory for King and Country and most likely for himself, although he might not publicly admit it. The winged figure atop the Temple of Fame beckoned the brave and patriotic, but despite the appeal of those labels, the young man may have had second thoughts, at least at that moment.

The young man is wearing a dunce cap. The practice of shaming students such as “blockheads” with a dunce cap began in the nineteenth century. A blockhead was defined in contemporary Anglo-English dictionaries as “a stupid fellow; a dolt.”^{30,31} A more complete definition was “A person, with a good deal of exaggeration, said to be as destitute of understanding as if his skull inclosed [sic] a block of wood in place of hemispheres of brain; a dolt, a fool, an ass, a stupid person.”³² Marryat’s schoolmaster complained that Marryat “could never come to any good, or be otherwise than [a] dunce, seeing how little heed [he] paid to his [schoolmaster’s] instructions.”³³ It is not known if Marryat actually ever wore a dunce cap.

Biographies do not indicate that he considered his personal decision to go to sea as ignorant or ill-advised, or one that should be avoided by other young men. The characters in his novels usually have a moment in which they doubt their decision, but then it is on to glory for them, even though they encounter many dangerous, sometimes death-defying, situations, some of which almost take their lives. In Marryat’s patriotic stories, John Bull kept a stiff upper lip in the face of danger.³⁴ This may account, at least to some extent, for the popularity of his books in the early nineteenth century.

Marryat was one of those ambitious young seamen who pursued fame and glory at their peril. For instance, during his service on the frigate *Aeolus* in 1811, it encountered a gale of wind that laid her “on her beam ends, her top-masts and mizen-masts were literally blown away, and she continued in that very perilous position for at least half an hour. Directions were then given to cut away the main-yard to save the main-mast and right the vessel, but so great was the danger attending the operation considered that *not* a man could be induced to attempt it until Marryat led the way.”³⁵ Marryat wrote, “I confess I felt gratified at this acknowledgement of a danger that none dared face. I waited a few seconds to see if a volunteer would step forward, resolved, if he did, that I would be his enemy for life, as he would have robbed me of the gratification of my darling passion—unbounded pride...to dare that which a gallant and hardy crew of a frigate had declined, was as climax of superiority which I had never dreamed of attaining.”³⁶

He was recognized for many heroic deeds, including the attempted rescues of several men who fell overboard. However, he was unsuccessful in his final rescue attempt, due to no fault of his own. He was almost swept away to sea before being rescued, exhausted and close to drowning. Soon thereafter, he was diagnosed with hemoptysis³⁷ in one lung. He was cautioned that he should not exert himself, but he ignored the warning, and collapsed shortly thereafter while dancing. He recovered after a long period of convalescence, but this injury ultimately caused his death many years later.

He was also one of those young men who clambered up the rock. In 1812, he was promoted to lieutenant, in 1815, he was promoted to post-captain, and in 1820, following the completion of *Master Blockhead*, received his first command. He was ultimately awarded the rank of Companions of the Most Honorable Military Order of the Bath, a high class of British military honor.



Plate no. 1, **Midshipman Blockhead, Fitting out Mastr Willm Blockhead HM Ship Hellfire West India Station**, portrays a young man excited to begin his naval career. He appears to be a young teenager, perhaps fourteen years of age. Dorothy M. George noted that the young man had Marryat's profile³⁸, and both George and Christopher Lloyd noted that the plate exemplified Marryat's own experiences.³⁹

It should be noted that Marryat's original watercolor sketch was much plainer. Cruikshank embellished it, adding several items.

The young man in the illustration is relatively well dressed. Although he wears a red jacket in the plate,⁴⁰ Marryat's watercolor study, completed in 1820, showed him wearing a blue naval jacket.⁴¹ In 1830, the jacket facings were changed from white to scarlet by order of King William IV, but the order was rescinded in 1843.

Most young people finished school at about that age. Some then entered a university, and some, such as Marryat, studied with a tutor in preparation for entering a university, but most did not continue their studies, instead entering an apprenticeship, joining the military, or finding a job that did not require additional training or education.

Many authors of sea literature have written about how excited they were to don their new clothing because their new status made them feel important. Marryat was no exception. Mildmay reminisced:

There are certain events in our lives poetically and beautifully described by Moore as ‘green spots in memory’s waste.’ Such are the emotions arising from the attainment, after a long pursuit, of any darling object of love or ambition; and although possession and subsequent events may have proved to us that we had overrated our enjoyment, and experience have shown us ‘all that is vanity,’ still recollections dwell with pleasure upon the beating heart, when the present only was enjoyed, and the picture painted by youthful and sanguine anticipation in glowing and delightful colours...⁴²

One of the red-letter days of my life was that on which I first mounted the uniform of a midshipman. My pride and ecstasy were beyond description. I had discarded the school and school-boy dress...⁴³

The young man is playfully brandishing his dirk⁴⁴. He is the only person in the illustration who appears pleased. A small replica of a ship sits on a crate in front of him. It must represent his excitement about going to sea. There are three pictures hanging on the wall: two scenes of sea battles, and a larger portrait of what may be Admiral Lord Nelson, minus his right arm, standing in front of a smoking cannon. It is not known if these pictures were exciting to him, but it may be assumed that they did not dissuade him from going to sea, especially after he witnessed Nelson’s funeral.

The room is plainly furnished, suggesting that either the family is not financially prosperous, or lives simply despite having the financial means to support a more sumptuous lifestyle.

A woman (presumably the young man’s mother) is copiously weeping because she doesn’t want her son to leave, or to enter the navy. Another woman appears to be upset. Her identity is not known. Marryat did not have any older sisters, so perhaps it is one of his aunts.⁴⁵ The presence of a woman wearing a cook’s uniform indicates the family is financially prosperous enough to afford at least one servant.

Three large stacks of invoices are on a table. It was expensive to properly outfit a young man. A large, open trunk in the center of the room is being packed. A man, who appears to be old enough to be his father, is reading a very long document entitled, “List of Necessaries for Fitting out a Midshipman.” The list might have been taken from David Morrice’s book, *The Young Midshipman’s Instructor; (Designed as a Companion to Hamilton Moore’s Navigation with Useful Hints to Parents of Sea Youth and to Captains and SchoolMasters in the Royal Navy)* (1801). Another list is attached to the lid of the box, entitled, “Inventory of Ma’ Blockhead’s Cloath(s).” The chest holds a pair of boxing gloves, a packet of medicinal powder, and a parcel labeled “Rags for Wounds.”

An elegant coat, perhaps made of brocade with a fur collar, with a matching hat, is tossed over the box. The size of the coat and hat indicate they were made for an adult, probably the

man, and the style is typical of men's fashions in 1820. Mildmay mentioned that his father took off his "sables," which suggests that the clothing belongs to the man. A man's waistcoat hangs over a chair.

The weeping woman is attired in what appears to be morning dress typical of the period. Her clothing is relatively devoid of adornment.

The floor is covered with items such as preserved foods and bottles of cherry brandy, and two books: "Domestic Medicine" and "Hamilton Moore." John Hamilton Moore of the Royal Navy, also referred to as Hamilton Moore, was the author of *The New Practical Navigator*. Mildmay mentioned that he became "an expert navigator and a good practical seaman."⁴⁶ The Royal Navy probably used that book to educate midshipmen in 1806, when Marryat began his naval career. There is also an assortment of personal possessions such as a cricket bat and ice skates, representing the childhood Master Blockhead is leaving behind. A cocked-hat case labeled "Will Blockhead" is also depicted.

The trunk is labeled with Master William Blockhead's name, and his destination: the H.M. Ship Hellfire, in the West India Station. Marryat received his serious injury in the West Indies. The name of the ship was undoubtedly Marryat's comment on the experience that awaited the new midshipman: "...there was no species of tyranny, injustice, and persecution, to which youngsters were not compelled to submit from those who were their superiors in bodily strength."⁴⁷

The following verse is found under the illustration: 'He hails in life's advancing day / amusive hopes and prospects gay / nor in the wide horizon round / Can e'er one little speck be found to cloud the scene – Anon'

Presumably, this speaks to the optimism of the young man, unclouded by thoughts of reality.

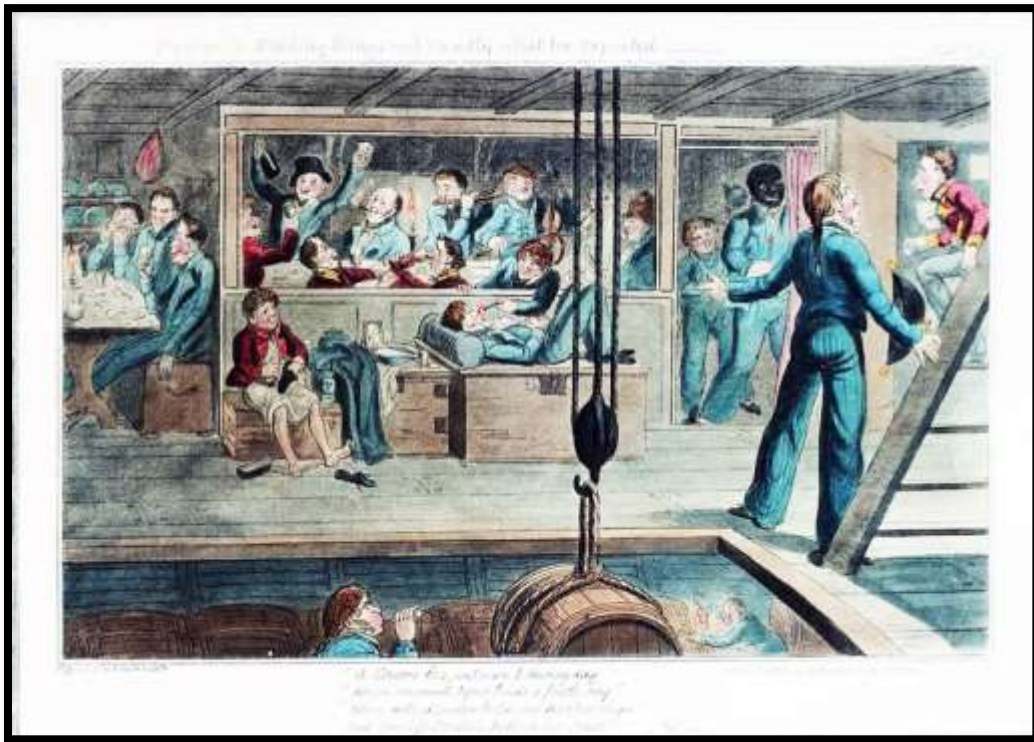


Plate no. 2, "FINDING THINGS NOT EXACTLY WHAT HE EXPECTED—", alludes to the new midshipmen's reaction to the environment onboard ship. Above the title,

Cruikshank added, “Master B introduced to the Mess &.” The rhyme under the illustration reads: “A cavern lies unknown to cheering day / Where one small taper lends a feeble ray / Where wild disorder hold her wanton reign / and careless mortals frolic in her train – Falconer”

Marryat captured this in Mildmay’s reaction⁴⁸ upon his initial introduction to the cavern in which midshipmen lived on board ship. Young men from good homes were used to clean and orderly living conditions. The crowded, uncomfortable, environment on board ship, complete with the stench of cargo, unwashed bodies, etc., was not at all what they expected – and they must have been shocked by the seemingly lackadaisical attitudes of more seasoned crew members toward this, and their unruly behavior below deck. Mildmay was appalled when he first saw where he would be living. He described his berth as a small hole under the deck, with an even smaller hole which let in a minimal amount of fresh air and light. A table covered with a food- and wine-stained tablecloth took up most of the space. Mildmay noted that in addition to bunks,

...the ‘tween-deck was crammed, with casks, and cases, and chests, and bags, and hammocks; the noise of the caulkers was resumed over my head and all around me; the stench of bilge-water, combining with the smoke of tobacco, the effluvia of gin and beer, the frying of beef-steaks and onions, and red herrings – the pressure of a dark atmosphere and a heavy shower of rain, all conspired to oppress my spirits, and render me the most miserable dog that ever lived...

Seeing his new living quarters, he experienced some doubt about the wisdom of his decision to go to sea:

‘Good Heaven!’ thought I, as I squeezed myself between the ship’s side and the mess table; and is this to be my future residence? Better go back to school; there, at least, there is fresh air and clean linen.

I would have written that moment to my dear, broken-hearted mother, to tell her how gladly her prodigal son would fly back to her arms; but I was prevented doing this, first by pride, and secondly by want of writing materials.⁴⁹

The illustration also depicts sailors entertaining themselves with activities such as smoking, drinking, and playing a flute, and watching Midshipman Blockhead’s reaction to his new quarters.

Lloyd pointed out the historical significance of Marryat’s textual description and this image: “Marryat’s description of the midshipman’s berth, the fetid cockpit below the waterline on the orlop deck, is the fullest and most convincing of all the accounts of Johnny Newcome’s introduction to the Navy. It is to a drawing of his, too, that we are indebted for one of the few contemporary sketches of what the berth was like.”⁵⁰

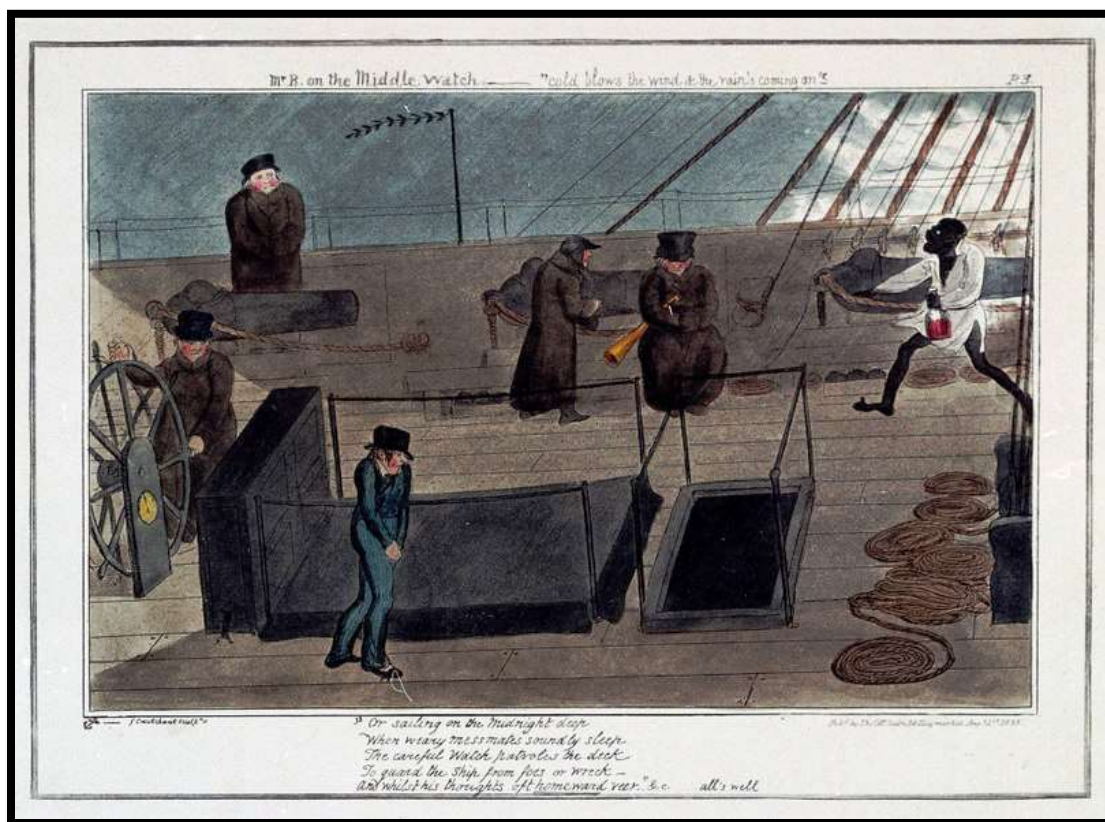
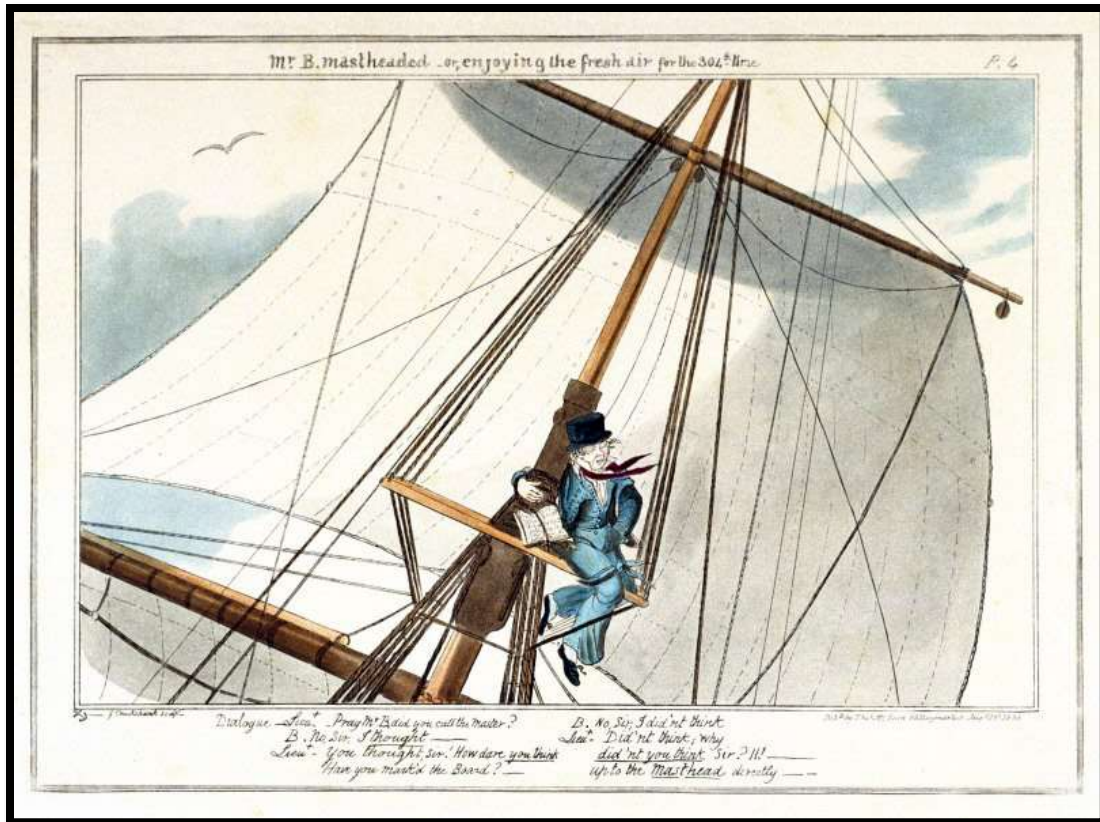


Plate no. 3, “**M^R B ON THE MIDDLE WATCH**—“*cold blows the wind & the rains coming on*”—”, exemplifies the misery of keeping watch in inclement weather.

The sailors in this illustration are cold and wet, bent to withstand the wind and driving rain. Rain clouds obscure any stars in the sky. This is far from the romantic illusions of a young man dreaming of going to sea: keeping watch on a balmy night, with the moon shining overhead in a clear, starlit sky, the ocean gently rippling, and so on, while dreaming of the girl he left behind. Marryat also wanted to include a plate showing morning watch, but in collaboration with Cruikshank, it was decided that there would be too many plates, so it was set aside.

Midshipman Blockhead looks absolutely miserable. Unlike his more experienced shipmates, he is not wearing a warm great coat. A thinly-clothed black servant is running toward his shipmates, bringing them a bottle of grog (?) to keep them warmer.

The inscription at the bottom of the plate is taken from ‘All’s Well’ from *English Fleet in 1342* (1805) by English dramatist and songwriter, Thomas Dibdin (son of Charles Dibdin) and composer John Braham: ‘Or sailing on the midnight deep / When weary messmates soundly sleep / The careful Watch patrols the deck / To guard the Ship from foes or wreck – / And whilst his thoughts of homeward veer. &c. all’s well’⁵¹



In Plate no. 4, “**MR B. MASTHEADED—OR, ENJOYING THE FRESH AIR FOR THE 304TH TIME**”, Midshipman Blockhead is sitting on the masthead, charged with the task of watching for enemy ships. Although it is windy, as indicated by the sail bellowing in the wind, as well as his necktie, he is taking a nap. His arm is wrapped around the beam, and he has tied his thigh to the spar, suggesting that he has sat there many times before. A book in his lap is open to a page which reads “Wilt thou upon ye high & giddy mast scale the ship bays, O yes & rock his brain.”⁵² Cruikshank added the book to Marryat’s original watercolor sketch, which was titled, “‘Mr B’ is without his book.”

One of the most common punishments for minor infractions onboard ship was mastheading: sending the offender up Jacob’s ladder to the main topmast crossstrees, where he would remain for an amount of time unknown to him. The conversation below the illustration is typical in such a situation:

“Lieutenant: Pray Mr B, did you call the Master?
 Blockhead: No, Sir, I thought –
 Lieu: You thought sir! How dare you think, Have you mark’d the Board?
 B: No, Sir, I didn’t think
 Lieu: Didn’t think, why didn’t you think Sir?!!! – up to the masthead directly.”

Marryat wrote about this punishment in his novel, *Newton Forster; or the Merchant Service* (1832):

When I was a midshipman, it was extremely difficult to avoid the mast-head. Out of six years served in that capacity, I once made a calculation that two of them were passed away perched upon the crosstrees, looking down with calm philosophy upon the microcosm below. Yes, though I *never* deserved it, I derived much future advantage from my repeated punishments. The mast-head for want of something worse to do became my study; and during the time spent there, I in a manner finished my education. Volumes after volumes were used to while away the tedious hours; and I believe it is to this mode of punishment adopted by my rigid superiors that the world is indebted for all the pretty books which I am writing.⁵³

Mildmay tells how he was found asleep on the masthead: “I made a bed for myself in one of the top-gallant studding sails...I very quietly began to prepare a sacrifice to my favourite deity, Somulus; but...I was caught napping, just at dusk.”⁵⁴

In Marryat’s *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, he turned this punishment into the farce he might have believed that it was.⁵⁵



Plate no. 5, “**M^R B.—SEEKING THE BUBBLE REPUTATION—**”, portrays the boarding of a French ship by British sailors. In the midst of a smoke-filled battle scene, with

cannon balls and bullets flying and dead men lying on the deck, Midshipman Blockhead pierces a French sailor in the chest. In retrospect, he realizes that it was not necessary to kill the man. Marryat's original watercolor sketch depicted a French sloop or frigate surrounded by the British ship's boats. The battle took place in the middle of the illustration, rather than in the foreground.

"Seeking the bubble reputation" is taken from Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It*, Act II, referring to someone who does things to enhance his reputation, even if there is no reason for doing them.⁵⁶

A quote from Lord Byron's epic poem, *The Corsair*, is found below the illustration:

'the pulse's maddening play /
That thrills the wanderer of the trackless way /
That for it self can woo the approaching fight /
And turn what some deem danger to delight /
No dread of death, if with us die our foes /
Save that it seems e'en duller than repose.'⁵⁷

Following a conflict between a Maltese privateer ship and the Royal Navy ship, *Impérieuse*, Marryat expressed his admiration and respect for the commanding officer, Lord Cochrane's, concern for the lives of his men. Marryat mused,

"Whether it is that the history of our country, imparted to us in our youth, is so full of sanguinary detail or that the phlegmatic disposition of our countrymen requires a certain stimulus to procure the necessary excitation; most certainly it is, that although from desuetude they shudder at slaughter before their eyes, they have a pleasure in reading its details on paper.

We are naturally a blood-thirsty nation. Those who join the ranks of the army, or enter into the naval service, fully establish the fact by their conduct; and those, who remain on shore in peace and security have as surely the seeds of the same vice as deeply implanted, and are as but the caged and domesticated lion who has had his nature subdued by kind treatment and sufficiency of food; but, let him once taste blood, his real disposition will be displayed and even his keeper will receive no mercy...

John Bull is but half satisfied with a despatch, even if it proclaims an important victory, if it be not attended with a slaughter commensurate with his ideas of what it ought to have been. He is too apt to estimate the danger and difficulty by the list of killed and wounded..."⁵⁸

It cannot be said that Marryat never sought the bubble reputation. The above discussion of the frontispiece describes some of those incidents.



Plate no. 6, “**WAITING ROOM AT THE ADMIRALTY—(*No Misnomer)**”, depicts a crowded waiting room filled with sailors, men of various social stations, and a father holding the hand of his young son, presumably hoping to find him a berth as a midshipman, or, more likely, as a midshipmite. The room is devoid of furnishings except for a small carpet and four chairs, and the title of the plate makes it clear that the men have been waiting for a long time. Only two of the men are in uniform – an elderly midshipman who has lost his right arm, and “an arrogant but insignificant young boy in foppish lieutenant’s uniform”.⁵⁹ The rest are wearing civilian garb, since they have yet to be appointed to a ship. Most of the men are thin, perhaps suggesting that money is scarce for them.

Marryat and many other unemployed naval officers spent a considerable amount of time in the Waiting Room at the Admiralty between 1815 and 1820, hoping to be selected from a list of 850 captains and sixty admirals for one of the few peacetime commands.

The man leaning against the wall on the left side of the illustration is Marryat. He is looking across the room, at a wall on which it is claimed he wrote the following verse:

“In sore affliction, tried by God’s command,
 Of patience Job the great example stands;
 But in these days a trial more severe
 Had been Job’s lot, if God had sent him here.”⁶⁰

Marryat's perception of the reality of his situation, as well as of the other men waiting there, is reflected by the statement at the bottom of the illustration, "'Tis the curse of service, that preferment goes by favor & affection." The illustration attributes it to Othello⁶¹, but it should be noted that the original Shakespearean version was "preferment goes by **letter** & affection."



In Plate no. 7, “**MR B. PROMOTED TO LIEUT AND FIRST PUTTING ON HIS UNIFORM**”, newly-promoted Lieutenant Blockhead is strutting for his proud relatives and admiring himself in the mirror. He has grown from a boy to a man, and the family has aged as well. The room appears to be the same as in Plate no. 1, except that it now has a rug on the floor, and a new, larger painting on the wall depicting the Royal Navy’s defeat of the French. A small dog shaved “in the French manner⁶²,” suggesting that fashion influences have changed, is standing on its hind legs, also looking in the mirror. Did new prosperity visit his family in his absence, enabling them to purchase the furnishings, were existing funds used, or did Marryat’s earnings help the family to afford the new furnishings?

Six years after joining the navy, Marryat was promoted to lieutenant. In the illustration, his father is beaming with pride. The man on the right is wearing an admiral’s uniform. Perhaps his influence contributed to Lieutenant Blockhead’s promotion.⁶³

Cruikshank added text from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* at the bottom of the illustration: “Some are born great, some achieve greatness.”⁶⁴ Since Marryat sought the bubble reputation, he

must have believed that he achieved greatness, but did he harbor the notion that he was born great?

Conclusion

Marryat had a successful naval career. While it is possible that the autobiographical story of Master B. was his attempt to subtly discourage other young men from going to sea, it is not probable because he was in the middle of his naval career, it may be that he was simply trying to convey realistic expectations to young men considering entering the Royal Navy.

Marryat could also have been reflecting the complex feelings of a parent toward a son joining the Royal Navy, in particular, about with regard to his own eldest son and namesake, Frederick.⁶⁵ Frederick entered the Royal Navy as a midshipman, clambered up the rock to the rank of Lieutenant and served with distinction, but was killed in a tragic accident in 1847, at the age of 27. The steam frigate on which he was serving hit a coral reef, trapping him underneath the ship, and killing all but eight seamen onboard. Although Frederick was “wild and extravagant – a source of expense and anxiety to his father... he was also gallant and good-hearted.”⁶⁶ Hannay commented that “It must have been a killing blow to the father to hear of the son’s death, under circumstances of which no man was better able to appreciate the horror than himself.”⁶⁷ He died the following year.

While this occurred many years after the publication of *Master Blockhead*, was the warning in its frontispiece more accurate than Marryat could have realized when he wrote it at the age of twenty-eight?

Endnotes

¹ “[H]owever accurately they may give sea-life as it appears to their authors, it must still be plain to every one that a naval officer, who goes to sea as a gentleman, “with his gloves on” (as the phrase is,) and who associated only with his fellow officers, and hardly speaks to a sailor except through a boatswain’s mate, must take a very different view of the whole matter from that which would be taken from a common sailor...” Richard Henry Dana Jr., *Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea*, Chapter 1 (London: Edward Moxon, 1841) 1.

² William O’Byrne, “Marryat, C.B., F.R.S., F.L.S.” *A Naval Biographical Dictionary*. Vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1849) 727.

³ David Hannay *Life of Frederick Marryat* (London: Walter Scott, 1889) 55-57

⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid*, author’s note preceding table of contents.

⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

⁷ *Ibid*, 82-3.

⁸ Mrs. Church wrote that her father “was quick to take offence, and no one could have decided, after an absence of six months, with whom he was friends, and with whom he was not.” Florence Marryat (Mrs. Ross Church), *Life and Letters of Captain Marryat*, Vol. II, (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1872) 121.

⁹ Per Mrs. Church, “To quote from his own words from the ‘Naval Officer,’ where this and many similar adventures are attributed to his hero...” and then quoted Marryat’s own description of the incident. .” Florence Marryat (Mrs. Ross Church), *Life and Letters of Captain Marryat*, Vol. I, (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1872) 34.

¹⁰ “This is truly a novel-writing age! Persons of all ranks and professions, who feel that they can wield a pen successfully, now strive to embody the fruits of their observations in a work of fiction...the officer who has witnessed many ‘moving accidents by flood and field’ instead of compiling the authentic history of a campaign, which would draw upon him the heavy responsibilities of an historian, or announcing the recital of his life and services, which might be thought to savour of egotism or presumption—instead of pursuing these difficult courses, he now plans a story, making its hero the spectator of scenes in which he has himself been engaged, and presses into it all the best gleanings of a past eventful life which his memory will supply; and then, having performed this comparatively easy task, he sends forth his anonymous production with the full assurance that it has a chance of being read and admired by many more than would ever cast a glance at any unvarnished statement of facts, which he might have composed with double labour and tenfold responsibility.” William Magnin, “Tales of Military and Naval Life,” *The Edinburgh Review or Critical Journal* 52(103) October 1830, 119-120.

¹¹ “Of ‘The Naval Officer,’ written, we believe, by Captain Marryat, of the Navy, we are sorry to be obliged to say, that it is marked by many violations of taste and propriety. But it was the author’s first, and probably a hasty production. and we are inclined to believe that he sees its faults as clearly as we do; for he has amply redeemed them in his excellent novel, ‘The King’s Own,’ which is entirely free from the impurities which obscure the merits of ‘The Naval Officer.’” Ibid, 136.

¹² Marryat wrote in the October 1832 issue of *The Metropolitan Magazine* regarding his first book, “[I]t may be well to remark that, being written in the autobiographical style, it was asserted by friends, and believed in general, that it was a history of the author’s life...Except the hero and heroine, and those parts of the work which supply the slight plot of it as a novel, the work in itself is materially true, especially in the narrative of sea adventure, most of which did (to the best of our recollection) occur to the author.” It should be noted that Marryat served as the magazine’s editor from 1832 to 1835 (or 6). Hannay, 79.

¹³ “Of ‘The Naval Officer,’ written, we believe, by Captain Marryat, of the Navy, we are sorry to be obliged to say, that it is marked by many violations of taste and propriety. But it was the author’s first, and probably a hasty production...’ Magnin, 36.

¹⁴ “Marryat.” *Temple Bar*, 37(1) December 1872, 100.

¹⁵ Church Vol. 1, 6.

¹⁶ According to Mrs. Church, “[a]s a family, they were vigorous both in mind and body and have evinced the possession of unusual talent.” Ibid, 8.

¹⁷R. Brimley Johnson, “Introduction” to Captain (Frederick) Marryat, *Peter Simple and the Three Cutters*, Vol. 1 (London: J.M. Dent and Company) xiii.

¹⁸ Hannay, 15

¹⁹ Church Vol. 1, 14.

²⁰ Robert L. Patten, *George Cruikshank’s Life, Times, and Art, Volume 1: 1792-1835* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 194.

²¹The title character advised the parent of a young man: “[T]hey do say that it’s no use baulking a lad if he wishes to go to sea, and that if he is determined he must go; now I think otherwise—I think a parent has the right to say no, if he pleases, upon the point: for you see, sir, a lad at the early age at which he goes to sea, does not know his own mind. Every high-spirited boy wishes to go to sea—its quite natural; but if the most of them were to speak the truth, its not that they want so much to go to sea, as that they want to go from school or from home, where they are under the control of their masters or their parents.” Captain (Frederick) Marryat, *Masterman Ready or the Wreck of the Pacific* (London: J.M. Dent and Company, 1896) 22.

²² Captain (Frederick) Marryat, *Frank Mildmay or the Naval Officer* ((London: J.M. Dent and Company, 1896) 13.

²³He was going to undertake the journey with a vice-consul for a dependency of Tripoli. Although they were guaranteed the protection of the kingdom’s ruler, the journey required travel for eight days without encountering water. “Nautical Anecdotes and Selections: Africa,” *The Nautical Chronicle* Vol. 40 (July-December 1818) 21.

²⁴ Patten, Vol. I, 194.

²⁵ Church, Vol. 1, 82.

²⁶ Mary Dorothy George, 'Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum', Vol. X (1820-1827), Trustees of the British Museum (1952) xxxviii.

²⁷ Ibid,172-3.

²⁸ “Sir Richard Grenville’s Farewell, on His Sailing for Foreign Parts in the Year 1585,” *A Sailor’s Garland*. Ed. John Masefield (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1906) 60.

²⁹ English naval commander Sir Richard Grenville died at the Battle of Flores (1591) when, cut off from a squadron of vessels sent to intercept a Spanish treasure fleet, he refused to surrender—

his ship, the *Revenge*, despite overwhelming odds. Commemorated in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem, "The Revenge: A Battle of the Fleet." No. 646, <https://www.bartleby.com/42/646.html>

³⁰ "Blockhead", Thomas Sheridan, *A Complete Dictionary of the English Language*" Vol. 1, 3rd ed. (London: Charles Dilly, 1790) [no page numbers]

³¹ "Blockhead", Noah Webster, *A Dictionary of the English Language* Vol. 1 (London: Black, Young, and Young, 1832) [no page numbers]

³² "Blockhead", J.A. Hill, *The Anglo-American Encyclopedia and Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (New Okr: J.A. Hill and Company, 1904) 532

³³ Church, Vol. I, 9

³⁴ This cultural trait was introduced during the Regency Era (1811-1820), counteracting the open sentimentality that prevailed during the eighteenth century.

³⁵ Church Vol. 1, 70

³⁶ Ibid, 70

³⁷ A ruptured blood vessel

³⁸ George, 172,

³⁹ George 172; Christopher Lloyd, *Captain Marryat and the Old Navy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939) 23

⁴⁰ As mentioned previously, the plate discussed in this paper was published in 1835.

⁴¹ British Museum, Museum no. 1891,1117.24.

⁴² Marryat (Mildmay) 10-11.

⁴³ Ibid, 11.

⁴⁴ A short sword used by midshipmen for thrusting.

⁴⁵ George mistakenly stated that the young woman was the young man's older sister. George, 173

⁴⁶ Marryat (Mildmay) 40.

⁴⁷ Church Vol. 1, 16.

⁴⁸ Mildmay had grand, delusional ideas about what his life as a midshipman would be like. “Verily believe I should have beheld my poor mother in her coffin with less regret than I could have foregone the gay and lovely scenes which I anticipated.” Marryat (Mildmay) 16.

⁴⁹ When Mildmay was about to leave home for Plymouth, where the ship was anchored, his mother threw her arms around him, weeping and covering his face with kisses. “I almost wondered what it meant,” he wrote, “and wished the scene was over... My father looked at me, as if he would inquire of my very inward soul whether I really did possess human feelings?... such was my sense of propriety, that I mustered up a tear for each eye, which, I hope, answered the intended purpose... How amply has this want of feelings towards a tender parent been recalled to my mind, and severely punished, in the events of my vagrant life.” Marryat (Mildmay) 10, 16.

⁵⁰ Lloyd, 23

⁵¹ This song appears in the monograph of the vocal score.

⁵² George Cruikshank must have recognized the parallels between this line, taken from Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* (Part 2, Act Third – Scene 1 – Westminster, Lines 9-31), and the punishment of mastheading. The melancholy king, feeling the weight of being a ruler and perceiving danger, is unable to fall asleep. Although the sea rocks a seaman sitting on the crossbeams into a state of slumber, it defeats the purpose of the seaman’s duty – and endangers the seaman. <https://www.playshakespeare.com/henry-iv-part-2/scenes/632-act-iii-scene-1>

⁵³ Captain (Frederick) Marryat, *Newton Forster or the Merchant Service* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1873) 163.

⁵⁴ Marryat (Mildmay) 45.

⁵⁵ Marryat (Mr. Midshipman Easy) 100-102.

⁵⁶ The phrase, “seeking the bubble reputation,” is found in Act II, Scene 7 of Shakespeare’s play, *As You Like It*. “Shakespeare.” *Shakespeare Webcast* (Transcript) 24 May 2007. Archived. www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/webcast/070524_shakespeare/language.shtml.

⁵⁷ Lord George Gordon Byron, *The Corsair*, Canto I (I), in *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron. From the Last London Edition*. Vol. II. (London: Cummings & Hilliard, 1814) 167.

⁵⁸ Church, Vol I, 28-9.

⁵⁹ George, 176.

⁶⁰ John Leyland, “The Admiralty Office,” *The Navy and Army Illustrated* 13(947) October 26, 1901, 130.

⁶¹ The original Shakespearean version of *Othello* (Act 1, Scene 1, lines 36-39) was “Preferment goes by **letter** and affection, **and not by old gradation, where each second stood heir to the first.**” [Emphasis added.] Iago is saying essentially the same thing as Cruikshank’s version: promotion is based on how well the candidate is liked – preference often trumps seniority. William Shakespeare, *The Works of Shakespeare: The Tragedy of Othello*, ed. H.C. Hart (London: Methuen and Co., 1903) 8.

⁶² George 176

⁶³ S.A. Cavell, *Midshipmen and Quarterdeck Boys in the British Navy, 1171-1831* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2012) 185.

⁶⁴ In Shakespeare’s play, *Twelfth Night* (Act 2, Scene V. line 145), Olivia’s household steward, Malvolio, is tricked into believing she loves him, He tells her “Some are born great” (which does not go over well with her), and “Some achieve greatness,---“. Olivia asks Malvolio which applies to him, to which he replies, “**And some have greatness thrust upon them.**” [Emphasis added.] William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night; or, What You Will* (New York: The University Society, 1901) 63.

⁶⁵ Marryat’s second son William, died in childhood, and his third son, Norman, died in infancy. His youngest son, Frank, served in the Royal Navy for four years, before taking an extended pleasure trip to California, during which he contracted a fatal case of yellow fever.

⁶⁶ Hannay, 154.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 154.

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