

Sir Joseph Banks and the Aubrey/Maturin Novels of Patrick O'Brian

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Introduction:

For some time now my primary field of research has been adaptation. In the Humanities, Adaptation Studies encompasses many dimensions of the traffic between different media whereby stories are re-told, and sometimes transformed, in a shift from one form to another. By far the most familiar variant of adaptation is that between the novel and the screen. Certain screenwriters, notably Andrew Davies, are celebrated principally for their TV versions of canonical 'classic' literature, for example *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bleak House*. The movies are no less voracious in their capacity to consume and 'regurgitate' literature, adapting both high-brow literary fiction and popular works, both recent publications and the work of authors who are centuries dead. Many works have been adapted more than once, invariably according to the logic that a new adaptation brings some fresh element to the exercise.

We might also note that adaptation spans a far wider terrain than just novel-to-film, and not always one in which the subsequent, the adapted, version is a screen text. Plays and epic poems and comic books are adapted. Stories from real life find their way to the screen, with producers often seeking to acquire the rights to associated biographies and autobiographies; making these 'biopics' a type of adaptation. TV programmes may give rise to films, such as *Mission Impossible* or *Charlie's Angels*, and vice versa, films may give rise to television, for example *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Novelizations of popular films are also a long-standing form, being books derived from the film (or film-script), the publication of which is frequently timed to coincide with, and bolster, the movie's theatrical release. We see too a close relationship between film and computer games. In some instances the films are the original or 'source' texts, though spin-off games are increasingly planned at the earliest stages of production. In other cases, the game has been the first 'text', giving rise to adaptations such as the *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* franchises.



Figure 1 A still trim **Joseph Banks** painted in 1772 by Joshua Reynolds. Image obtained through Wikimedia Commons.

The Adaptation of Joseph Banks

All of which seems to take us a long way from Joseph Banks. How might he relate to the study of adaptation? My starting point in this respect is a 1987 biography of Banks¹. On its cover is one of the more famous images of the great man, still young, before he becomes the heavy figure of later years; the 1772 painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds that hangs in London's

National Portrait Gallery. The author is Patrick O’Brian. O’Brian had earlier written another biography, of Picasso, whom he had known personally, but is primarily known as the writer of the Aubrey/Maturin series; twenty-one historical novels that form a continuous story, set in the Royal Navy in the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. The first, *Master and Commander*, was published in 1969. The twenty-first was unfinished at the time of his death, aged 85, in 2000. A film adaptation of one of the novels, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, starring Russell Crowe, was made in 2003.

As an author O’Brian inspires a somewhat cultish form of devotion. Many readers profess to having read the entire series several times. Its central relationship between lion-hearted naval Captain Jack Aubrey and his saturnine friend Stephen Maturin – physician, natural historian and secret intelligence agent – may justly be regarded as one of the great friendships in English Literature. The series’ wealth of technical detail and arcane naval terminology has also given rise to ‘affiliated’ texts that illuminate the language and history of the period; addressing matters as diverse as ship’s rigging, types of cannon, and recipes from the galley. Other readers, however, find the fascination with naval and other minutiae to be utterly unrewarding. One reader of my acquaintance gave up on the first novel in the series, pronouncing it unreadable. Equally, she is perfectly happy to attend my annual Trafalgar Day Dinner, with dishes from the cookbook *Lobscouse and Spotted Dog*ⁱⁱ, all in turn derived from meals described in the Aubrey/Maturin novels. Patrick O’Brian, it appears, is the literary equivalent of Marmiteⁱⁱⁱ (another U.K. export) – you either love him or hate him.

A key feature of the Aubrey/Maturin series is the interweaving of fact and fiction. To a certain extent this is a prerequisite of the historical novel genre, in which the events of ‘real’ history form the backdrop to invented stories. Bernard Cornwell’s *Sharpe* series (also set in the Napoleonic Wars, albeit on land) follows a similar pattern, with the imagined adventures of its titular hero mapped onto the major military actions, and with invented interactions between the fictional principal characters and actual historical figures, most notably the Duke of Wellington who rose to prominence as a general and later field-marshal in those campaigns. In the O’Brian novels Jack Aubrey has keen memories of his hero, Nelson, but the famous Admiral does not appear as a character proper, though many other historical personages, mostly senior naval and political figures, do crop up across the stories. Some of these figures appear in what might be termed the ‘live action’ as speaking characters in the narrative, for example The Duke of Clarence (Prince William, Third son of King George III) and Viscount Keith (a British Admiral). Others are frequently referred to but do not appear, such as Captain Cook (The British explorer in whose first great voyage of the Pacific, 1768-71, Joseph Banks took part) and Captain Bligh (most famous for the mutiny on HMS *Bounty* under his command in 1789). However, the most significant feature of O’Brian’s use of history is his creative *adapting* of actual events and individuals into fictionalized, but nonetheless clearly recognizable, versions of themselves. Of these, Jack Aubrey looms the largest.

For it is widely understood that Aubrey is modelled on real-life naval Captain, later Admiral, Thomas Cochrane. Aubrey’s naval career closely follows Cochrane’s; dazzling successes as a frigate captain in the Mediterranean, bold actions that inspire popular fervour, but also political controversy, a financial scandal, and – in the later

phases – involvement in the independence movements in South America^{iv}. Cochrane’s radical Whig politics may differ from Aubrey’s hereditary Toryism, but the other parallels are numerous and sustained.

Joseph Banks may be said to exist in two different ways across the 21 novels. Firstly, Banks is mentioned by name in several and even makes a brief speaking appearance in *The Yellow Admiral*^v, the 18th in the series. Secondly, O’Brian takes aspects of the real Joseph Banks and adapts them into a fictional character, Sir Joseph Blaine. Blaine is the Head of Naval Intelligence, the official to whom intelligence agent Stephen Maturin makes his reports, and he appears in almost all of the novels that comprise the series. In addition to the near-match between their names, O’Brian develops



Figure 2 Joseph Banks from an engraving after the painting by Thomas Phillips. Banks is depicted in his role as President of the Royal Society in 1812. Image obtained through Wikimedia Commons.

Blaine into a character with numerous similarities to Banks. Blaine’s particular passion is Entomology, and O’Brian makes him President of the Entomological Society, paralleling Banks’ position at the Royal Society. Much like Banks after the success of his great early voyage, Blaine bases himself comfortably in England, sustaining a copious correspondence with learned men around the world, receiving and exchanging specimens of interest.

Anyone familiar with the Aubrey/Maturin novels will confirm that accounts of food and companionability are among their principal pleasures. When Maturin and Blaine meet, either at Blaine’s house near Shepherd Market or at the fictional club Black’s (O’Brian’s cypher for the actual establishment ‘White’s’) they invariably share a meal of lobster followed by boiled fowl with oyster sauce. Hence it is no surprise to find that in one of the later novels Blaine, like Banks, is growing markedly ‘stouter’^{vi}, even ‘portly’^{vii}. At

times, particularly in sequences when Blaine refers to Banks, O’Brian has to work hard to avoid narrative confusion as to which Sir Joseph is under discussion. This difficulty is particularly in evidence in *The Reverse of the Medal*^{viii} where a parcel of bones (containing a secret message) is – ostensibly - sent across the Channel by the real anatomist Georges Cuvier, to the real Banks, who in turn sends them to Blaine, knowing that he is to meet Maturin.

Direct reference to Banks, to the Royal Society, to its Fellows, and to its journal *Philosophical Transactions* increases in the Aubrey/Maturin series as O’Brian researches and produces his Banks biography, remaining a constant feature thereafter. In *The Letter of Marque*, published in 1988, one year after the publication of the biography, an important dinner features at least four Fellows of the Society and the conversation touches upon its ‘internal politics’ with one Fellow referring somewhat acidly to its ‘committee largely made up of mathematicians and antiquaries’^{ix}. The

next novel, *The Thirteen Gun Salute*, contains a lengthy character analysis of Banks, ostensibly the musings of Stephen Maturin, but clearly drawn from O'Brian's research for the biography:

‘Sir Joseph’s judgment of a plant or a beetle was more to be relied upon than his judgment of a man; his general kindness sometimes led him into acquaintances that his friends regretted and his general obstinacy confirmed him in them. Stephen had seen something of an obsequious, bullying fellow named Bligh, a naval officer alas, whose government of New South Wales had ended in very great discredit for everyone concerned; yet Banks still countenanced the man. Stephen was fond of Sir Joseph and he thought him an excellent president of the Society, but he did not feel that judgment was his most outstanding quality.’^x

If *The Thirteen Gun Salute* introduces the theme that the New South Wales colony is problematic, the succeeding novel *The Nutmeg of Consolation* develops this idea to the fullest degree. At a meeting with Stamford Raffles (real-life statesman and founder of the city of Singapore), Maturin – and of course, the reader – are warned to expect that the colony at Sydney will be brutal and illiberal, marked by violence and extreme anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment^{xi}. Given that readers know Maturin to be an Irish Catholic, this narrative foreshadowing signals a problem ahead. Later, Maturin indeed describes Sydney as ‘squalid, dirty, formless, with ramshackle wooden huts placed without regard to anything but temporary convenience twenty years ago, dust, apathetic ragged convicts, all filthy, some in chains – the sound of chains everywhere.’^{xii} At a dinner there Maturin finds himself in conversation with an objectionable (and fictional) Captain Lowe, in which Joseph Banks, the King’s Merino Sheep, and Captain John Macarthur (real-life wool pioneer and entrepreneur) are discussed. Lowe holds a grudge against Banks for his having tried to prevent Macarthur from obtaining any of the King’s sheep to improve his Australian flock. The reason for which was as Maturin explains – “Sir Joseph strongly objects to duels, on moral grounds; and Captain Macarthur was in London to be court-martialled for engaging in one.”^{xiii} Here, O'Brian recycles his biographical research into a foundation upon which to build his fiction – in this case a profound antipathy between Maturin and Lowe. At the meal’s conclusion Lowe insults Maturin, saying “I don’t give a bugger for Joe Banks; and I don’t give a bugger for you either, you half-baked sod of a ship’s surgeon.”^{xiv} Maturin does not share Banks’ scruples with regards to duels, and Lowe is shortly upon his back, begging Maturin’s pardon at sword-point. The novel contains several more unflinchingly critical descriptions of cruelty in the Sydney penal colony and accounts of the harshness of the surrounding country. Maturin says “I remember Banks telling me that when first they saw new Holland and sailed along its shore the country made him think of a lean cow, with bare scraggy protruding hip-bones. Now, you know very well what affection and esteem I have for Sir Joseph; and I have the utmost respect for Captain Cook too... But what possessed them to recommend this part of the world to Government as a colony I cannot tell... What infatuation.” “Perhaps,” his interlocutor replies, “it seemed more promising after so many thousand miles of sea.”^{xv} O'Brian’s unremitting portrayal of the embryonic Australia may well have had an impact on the author’s popularity there. By comparison, it is notable that, despite several Aubrey/Maturin novels addressing the War of 1812 and its repercussions, he was generously, sometimes rapturously,

received as an author in the United States of America, whose sea-farers he generally describes positively.

In *The Yellow Admiral* O'Brian is able to weave material from his study of Banks into a wonderful sequence where the Royal Philosopher's Club - a sub-set of the Royal Society's Fellows - including Banks, Aubrey and Maturin - meet at the Mitre Inn for a generous supper prior to the formal proceedings at Somerset house. The enthusiasm for good food and drink that marks the fictional Aubrey and Maturin was, of course, famously shared by the actual Banks, making this imagined encounter both entertaining and plausible. O'Brian writes 'The Philosophers were not a particularly ascetic body of men; few of them had ever allowed philosophy to spoil their appetites - their president weighed over fifteen stone - and they now set about their dinner with the earnestness it deserved.' In this sequence the group despatch 'roast beef, its trimmings, warden pie, treacle tart' and 'every kind of cheese known in the three kingdoms', washed down with much Port and Chateau Latour, then depart for Somerset House. O'Brian writes, 'It was quite a walk... virtually all the Fellows were reasonably philosophic by the time they got there, and the hard benches, and the arid nature of the paper read to them, dealing with the history of the integral calculus... sobered them entirely.'^{xvi}



Figure 3 1807 portrait of **Lord Cochrane** by Peter Edward Stroehling painted seven years before Cochrane's disgrace and dismissal from the Royal Navy. Image obtained through Wikimedia Commons.

flourished in the War.'^{xviii} Maturin is of Irish and Catalan ancestry, and O'Brian had an Irish name and lived in Catalonia. Maturin - like O'Brian - is described as physically slight, wiry, secretive, and a talented linguist. For years, O'Brian had supplemented his income from original writing with translation work.

O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin novels enjoyed a substantial increase in popularity in the early 1990s, following a re-launch for the American market. The interest in the books, however, came at the cost of an increased media interest in the author himself - by now in his 80's and known for being protective of his privacy. The 'true' story of Patrick O'Brian - as it emerged following a *Daily Telegraph* expose^{xvii} and BBC documentary in 1998 - would add another layer to readers' understanding of the novels in terms of their real and fictional parallels - of Aubrey/Cochrane, Blaine/Banks etc. Many readers had long believed that while the character of Jack Aubrey was modelled upon the historical figure of Cochrane, Stephen Maturin was in key respects like

O'Brian himself. Maturin works in intelligence, and O'Brian, in the short essay 'Black, Choleric & Married' that accompanied *The Thirteen Gun Salute*, describes himself as having 'joined one of those intelligence organisations that

O'Brian, it was revealed in his last year of life, had been born Richard Patrick Russ, and was English, not Irish, as many commentators and reviewers had mistakenly assumed and which O'Brian had happily left uncorrected. He had left his first wife

and two children during the Second World War and re-married in 1945, changing his name by deed poll shortly thereafter^{xix}. O'Brian's most substantial act of adaptation had, in fact, been to adapt himself. Certain aspects of the Aubrey/Maturin novels assume added meaning or poignancy when read in the light of this knowledge. Maturin's frequent musings on the nature of his public and private identities, and his recurring fear that an encounter may reveal him as an intelligence agent, echo O'Brian's situation as an author whose past was not as it seemed. More specifically, twice in the novels Maturin rescues and sees to the care of a pair of children who will otherwise perish. One might reasonably observe that this is emotional territory which he is impelled to re-visit. Emily and Sarah Sweeting, survivors of a smallpox epidemic and Maturin's first pair of charges, go on to figure in several of the novels and eventually mature into happy, settled, members of what may be regarded as his permanent London 'home', The Grapes inn. Their future seemingly assured, he repeats an equivalent rescue when he redeems a pair of Irish siblings from slavery in North Africa and ensures their repatriation^{xx}. In writing his fiction, he is, in a sense, re-writing his own past. Forearmed with biographical knowledge of O'Brian one inevitably questions the relationship between the actions of the author and those of his literary creation.

The work for which O'Brian is most famous fits into that most uneasy category, historical fiction. These are invented stories which acquire much of their force and value through their adequacy to historical reality, and as we have seen, through their careful use of historical record and biographical research. A significant part of the pleasure of reading them comes from appreciating that balance. To read the Aubrey/Maturin novels is, if only in a small part, to engage with some of the world and materials that O'Brian uses for his biography of Banks. And, even if we know it is against his wishes, it is now difficult to approach them in a way that ignores our biographical knowledge of the author himself.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Patrick O'Brian, *Joseph Banks: A Life* (London: Harvill, 1987)

ⁱⁱ Anne Grossman and Lisa Thomas, *Lobscouse and Spotted Dog: Which It's a Gastronomical Companion to the Aubrey/Maturin Novels of Patrick O'Brian*. (New York: Norton, 1987)

ⁱⁱⁱ "Marmite" is a British brand name for an edible yeast extract product. The company slogan is "Love it or Hate it."

^{iv} David Cordingly, *Cochrane: The Real Master and Commander* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007)

^v Patrick O'Brian, *The Yellow Admiral* (London: Norton, 1996)

^{vi} Patrick O'Brian, *The Commodore* (London: Norton, 1995), p25.

^{vii} O'Brian, *Commodore*, p42.

^{viii} Patrick O'Brian, *The Reverse of the Medal* (London: Norton, 1986) p272-276.

^{ix} Patrick O'Brian, *The Letter of Marque* (London: Norton, 1988), p216.

^x Patrick O'Brian, *The Thirteen Gun Salute* (London: Norton, 1989), p39.

^{xi} Patrick O'Brian, *The Nutmeg of Consolation* ((London: Norton, 1989), p76.

^{xii} O'Brian, *Nutmeg*, p233.

^{xiii} O'Brian, *Nutmeg*, p238.

^{xiv} O'Brian, *Nutmeg*, p239.

^{xv} O'Brian, *Nutmeg*, p281.

^{xvi} O'Brian, *Yellow Admiral*, p 241.

^{xvii} Ben Fenton, "The Secret Life of Patrick O'Brian," *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 1999.

^{xviii} O'Brian, *Thirteen Gun*, p327.

^{xix} Dean King, *Patrick O'Brian: A Life Revealed* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000)

^{xx} O'Brian, Patrick. *The Hundred Days* (London: Harper-Collins, 1998)