



Surgeon Maturin

Last month I celebrated my 65th birthday. Years ago, that was a wished for but rarely attainable age. Today it is not unusual and, to some degree, an age to look forward to. For my birthday, I celebrated by going to see *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, a new maritime adventure movie extracted from one of the volumes of Patrick O'Brian's incredible saga of Napoleonic England, sometimes referred to as the Aubrey and Maturin series. I cannot think of any literary work of such length that provides such an all-encompassing picture of an era with no reference or acknowledgment of sensibility to the modern era. When you are reading, you are in that age and if you don't know what spotted dicks or topgallantmasts are, tough.

The topgallantmasts had already been struck down on deck and all hands were busy securing the boats on the booms with double gripes, sending preventer stays, shrouds, braces and backstays, clapping double-breechings on to the guns, covering the forehatch and scuttles with tarpaulins and battening them down. [Patrick O'Brian, *Far Side of the World*, vol. 10 of the Aubrey/Maturin novels, paperback ed., Norton, New York (1992)]

If you are of a mind to it, you can look up the various terms. And when it comes to sails, O'Brian conveniently provided an illustration of "a square-rigged ship hung out to dry in a calm." From there you can find that the topgallant masts were the smallest sails at the very top of the masts. Their function, considering their small size, compared to the mainsails or courses, I have never figured out. But that's OK. It is not the technical terms that provide the sense of involvement and adventure but the drama in the Captain's cabin and the Admiralty. It is the enthralling plots filled with elaborate details.

For years I have always been intrigued by the descriptions of the voyages of Cooke and the chronicles of Hakluyt. It was one of the reasons that I found *Latitude*, the story of John Harrison and the engineering of the first precision chronometer, so engaging ("The First Modern

Engineer," March 1999 editorial). Beside the discoveries that take place during the voyages, the series, twenty volumes in all, depicts in incredible detail this time in history when the Age of Discovery has been replaced by one of exploration and exploitation.

Perhaps the most interesting character for an engineer is that of Stephan Maturin, the ship's surgeon. He is of Irish-Catalan descent, trained in medicine. But he is also a spy for the Admiralty against Napoleon. Outrageous? Not the way O'Brian tells it.

In addition to the incredibly well-crafted storytelling, I have been drawn to this series by the picture O'Brian paints of a period of exploration. It was not just the traversal of oceans for commerce and power, but also the discovery of unknown flora and fauna. In the insatiably curious Maturin, O'Brian creates a scientist eager to discover the New World, record his findings, and present it to his peers. In one episode, Maturin is able to go to Paris to give a paper as a distinguished scientist.

When anyone makes a movie these days of a book, or in this case books, that you have enjoyed, seeing the finished product can be a dispiriting event. Certainly, I have not been disappointed by the rendering of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series. I'm looking forward to seeing the conclusion later this month. But I'm a little anxious about *Master and Commander*, particularly the depiction of the surgeon/scientist Maturin by Paul Bettany.

But if you don't have much of an inclination to go to movies these days, then I suggest you go to your favorite bookstore and get the first volume, *Master and Commander*. But please understand that it is not the story depicted in this new movie. That comes nine volumes later. But, oh what a journey you will have getting there...and beyond!

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Editor