



## **Commander: The Life and Exploits of Britain's Greatest Frigate Captain**

*Stephen Taylor*

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## **Commander: The Life and Exploits of Britain's Greatest Frigate Captain** Stephen Taylor

Edward Pellew, captain of the legendary *Indefatigable*, was quite simply the greatest British frigate captain in the age of sail. Left fatherless at age eight, with a penniless mother and five siblings, Pellew fought his way from the very bottom of the navy to fleet command. Victories and eye-catching feats won him a public following. Yet he had a gift for antagonizing his better-born peers, and he made powerful enemies. Redemption came with his last command, when he set off to do battle with the Barbary States and free thousands of European slaves. Opinion held this to be an impossible mission, and Pellew himself, leading from the front in the style of his contemporary Nelson, did not expect to survive.

Pellew's humanity, fondness for subordinates, and blind love for his family, and the warmth and intimacy of his letters, make him a hugely engaging figure. Stephen Taylor gives him at last the biography he deserves.

## **Commander: The Life and Exploits of Britain's Greatest Frigate Captain Details**

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## **From Reader Review Commander: The Life and Exploits of Britain's Greatest Frigate Captain for online ebook**

### **Scott says**

EXCELLENT book. Sir Edward Pellew / Lord Exmouth was far more famous as Horatio Hornblower's mentor and for serving as a model for Jack Aubrey in the Aubrey. But fiction did not do him justice. While Nelson is the Immortal of the British Navy of the age, Pellew fought a number of single-ship frigate actions (far rarer than fiction would have you believe, it seems) that marked him as the most capable seaman and captain of his time. He excelled at training his crews into a very cohesive fighting force, and brought his crews to the height of naval gunnery. Taking on a ship of the line with two frigates was the height of nerve - but also of confidence in his ship and crew.

Pellew was not quite "the thing", though. As a country man with few connections and an unfashionable family, he was never going to have the advantages that "gentleman" officers had, and he was looked down on as a result, even when he was the darling of the public and even the Monarchy after his brilliant victories. He was quite capable of making enemies and frequently hurt his own interests. Despite this, he eventually earned his flag and fought perhaps the most glorious action of his career at an age when most admirals were happy to sit in port and let the younger men earn the glory. His action at Algiers was nothing short of brilliant, and earned the praise of both admirers (such as Lord Wellington) as well as his enemies.

Taylor's book is an excellent study of this unknown man. He takes advantage of many family papers and resources that help to bring out information not commonly known and/or previously utilized. Commander tells a compelling and interesting story that should be read by anyone interested in naval history and biography.

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### **George Conger says**

Fascinating story poorly told. The author gets in the way of his subject time and again, telling the reader what to think. Passable but not much more

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### **Reni says**

Ein Glück, dass sich nach bald schon wieder einem Jahrhundert ein neuer Autor dieser faszinierenden Persönlichkeit angenommen hat.

Das einzige, was sich dieser Schreiber im Vergleich mit seinen Vorgängern vorwerfen lassen muss, ist, dass er ein wenig trockener schreibt. Was für eine Biografie allerdings kein Genickbruch ist. Zumal ich, wie in den anderen Reviews schon angedeutet, mich bei den Vorgängern durchaus oft gewundert hat, was der ein oder andere Paragraph überhaupt in einer Biografie verloren hat.

Trotzdem hätte ich auch gerne eine Papierausgabe der Parkinson-Bio im Regal stehen, unter anderem anderen, weil der Ton, in dem der Text verfasst ist, sich so köstlich liest. Das macht keine gute Biografie, aber ein gutes Buch. Zum anderen, weil bei Parkinson ein paar besonders schöne komplett (oder fast

komplett) abgedruckt sind, die Taylor leider nur in Auszügen zitiert (leider auch den wunderschönen Brief, den Pellew als letzten gesucht an Spencer schickt, um nicht von seiner „dear Indy“ getrennt zu werden).

Ich vermisste auch ein paar andere Kleinigkeiten oder Ereignisse, besonders auffällig das erste Absetzen von royalistischen Truppen in Quiberon um 1795, die Taylor zumindest in soweit hätte erwähnen können, um Parkinson entweder zu verifizieren oder Pellews Teilnahme an der Unternehmung als Quatsch abzutun.

Herr Taylor setzt des Weiteren bei seinen Lesern etwas mehr Kontextwissen voraus als seine Vorgänger, vor allem, was wichtige Seeschlachten der Zeit angeht. Auch bei denen z. B. Hintergründen und Nachwehen der fehlgeschlagenen Invasion von Irland wurde im Vorgänger wesentlich mehr Raum gegeben, sowie den Kampagnen des amerikanischen Unabhängigkeitskrieges bei denen Pellew zugegen war. Andererseits, heutzutage wird kaum jemand Interesse an einer Biografie über Pellew haben, dem Schlagwörter wie Trafalgar, Copenhagen und die Schlacht von Abukir nichts sagen. Taylor konzentriert sich tatsächlich nur auf sein Biografieobjekt, was allerdings definitiv nicht verkehrt ist.

Dafür geht Taylor bei einigen anderen sehr erfreulichen Dingen ins Detail, wie etwa Pellews Fürsorge für seine jungen Untergebenen. Wie Taylor selbst bemerkt, erkennt der Forester-Fan darin eindeutig die beeindruckende Vaterfigur, die sich der Autor für seinen fiktionalen Marinehelden ausgesucht hatte.

Dennoch kommt mir die Biografie einfach nicht lang genug vor. Hier und da mehr Details, noch eine kurze Anekdote mehr, ein weiterer Brief, oder einfach nur die zitierten Briefe vollständiger, dann würde ich von einer perfekten Biografie schreiben. So fand ich sie einfach nur sehr gut, aber nicht erschöpfend. Die nächste, bitte!

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### **Jack Hwang says**

Although my prior impression of Captain Pellew was from, as most readers, C.S. Forester's Hornblower series, I am very pleased to say that the author of this well-written biography has done a great job. Also, I would even say that the British actor Robert Lindsay played the role very very well in the acclaimed Hornblower mini TV series.

It's no doubt that CS Forester blended Pellew & co. into the fictions masterfully. For example, the cutting-out of the French corvette Papillon in Midshipman Hornblower (Even Chance in TV mini series) resembled Jeremiah Coglan's daring cut-out of French gun-brig Cerbère. Coglan, as an acting lieutenant and very junior midshipman, was one of Pellew's most favorite protégés -- just like Hornblower in CS Forester's fiction.

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### **Jeffrey Thiessen says**

I enjoyed this biography of Admiral Edward Pellew, 1st Viscount Exmouth, GCB that I picked up on a discounted bookshelf. A contemporary of Lord Nelson, Edward Pellew served with the Royal Navy in during the American Revolution and ended his active service at the Bombardment of Algiers where he secured the release of the 1,200 Christian slaves. I found this to be an interesting read and insight into a golden age for the British Navy.

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### **J.D. Brayton says**

Most engrossing for those fascinated by the age of British sail. There was a reason they ruled the seas-where certain aspects of British land forces tend to underwhelm , the stories of Admiral Pellew and Nelson (among many) are still astounding.

While Pellew's strict monarchist beliefs don't square with my own, his extraordinary abilities and raw courage are STILL awe inspiring- these men were a class unto their own.

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### **Sam Schreiner says**

Great read of one of the best Frigate Commanders England had. Somehow Pellew's accomplishments are obscured in Nelson's shadow but Taylor makes that case that he was the better fighting sailor.

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### **Shelley says**

I was very excited to read this book, but it took me ages to finish. It's a bit dry and a bit repetitive (writes the lawyer, used to reading dry, repetitive books).

There's a bad error made about Pellew being "overdue" to promotion to admiral, when the reality was promotion was strictly according to the Navy List (that is, by seniority -- once you made captain, you had to wait your turn; if you lived long enough, you'd make admiral). That's Age of Sail 101. It's possible the author meant something else, like perhaps because he'd already done so much as a captain he ought to have been an admiral, but I doubt it; Pellew was a much better captain than he ever was an admiral. That's the sort of error that calls into question the rest of the book, and it's unfortunate.

Anyway, probably 3.5 if I could. Rounding up because his was an interesting life, and it makes me want to go back and reread Hornblower.

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### **Leelan says**

Christmas present. My wife really loves me!

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I'm on page 99 now. It's a fascinating read. Despite the author's initial protestations that the Life of Edward Pellew, the "Commander" and subject of this book, formed the basis for O'Brian's Jack Aubrey, so far I see more parallels to Forester's Horatio Hornblower. It's like Forester stole Pellew's life and gave it to Hornblower. But that's OK. O'Brian is a poor writer when compared to Forester. I read O'Brian's "Master and Commander" and found it jarring and clumsy. I read all of Forester's Hornblower books and enjoyed them immensely except for only a few unfortunate and ill advised adventures on land.

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I just finished reading the book a few minutes ago. Once I started reading about Pellew's dealings with Algiers I just couldn't stop. I had to finish! It seems that things have not really changed in that part of the world in these intervening two hundred years. That is very sad. But I really enjoyed finding out about a man who was just a name to me after reading Forester's *Horatio Hornblower*. I find I have come to agree with the author as well. Pellew was the greatest fighting sailor of his age. Nelson was a brilliant naval tactician who had the good fortune to die in the midst of his greatest triumph. Nelson was better suited to naval battles than private life at which he decidedly failed. Pellew's main faults were trying too hard to advance his sons and brother's careers. They did not have his ability or aptitude for the life of a ship's officer. But the Navy was all he knew and nepotism was the rule in the navy and not the exception so he cannot be faulted too heavily for that. Pellew did his job and his duty very well. He succeeded in almost every military endeavor he undertook. It was in dealing with his fellow officers and the Admiralty that he was not so successful. His bombardment of Algiers should have ended the Barbary problem. But England and the European powers dropped the ball on any lasting effects of his victory. They allowed the pirates to recover though they never were again quite the plague on shipping that they were before.

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### **Andrew says**

All of the interesting stuff seems to have happened after he retired. Unfortunately, that means the first 2/3s of the book are very engaging.

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### **Mick says**

Though he's best known today from the fictional *Hornblower* series by C.S. Forester, the real Sir Edward Pellew - later 1st Viscount Exmouth - was a far from obscure figure. From his first command in the American Revolutionary War, where he played a key role in the defeat of Benedict Arnold's makeshift American navy on Lake Champlain, to his success in the decades of war against France after the revolution, troubled Indian command, and the bombardment of Algiers (also related in Gile's Milton's book about a relative of Pellew, *White Gold*) which brought an end to Christian slavery in North Africa, the Cornish seaman's exploits made him a household name in a time when great naval officers were celebrities.

Taylor's excellent biography of Exmouth focuses not only on the strengths of the man (his seamanship and mastery of frigate warfare, his generally close relationship with his crews) but also his flaws (nepotism, most notably, but also paranoia and weak diplomatic skills). It's a generally well-rounded volume, celebrating Pellew's achievements while criticising his weaknesses, though at times a bit more impartiality may have been warranted. *Commander* is not all character analysis, though. Taylor narrates the numerous engagements which made Pellew famous in a clear, fast-paced manner, which is informative but not bogged down in nautical minutiae.

This isn't hard hitting biography. Taylor is, perhaps reasonably, too admiring of his subject for that. It's more of an adventure story, featuring actual events and actual people. It's a style of biography I enjoy, and this book is an excellent example of it.

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### **Steve says**

I really enjoyed this book. The subject, Edward Pellew, is a fascinating and compelling character. Pellew was a powerful, vital sea commander of great courage and zeal. He treated his crews fairly, fought his enemies fiercely, and loved his family deeply. His career showed what a leader can do who is willing to lead from the front, treat everyone with respect, and clearly focus the team on their goals. The author also touched on Pellew's weaknesses such as pushing his older sons too fast into careers, fighting with his peers, and often clumsy communications with senior officers and government officials. The biographer, Stephen Taylor, writes clearly and honestly in favor of this amazing character.

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### **Nooilforpacifists says**

Pellew was England's greatest Frigate captain. He won his spurs before anyone had heard of Nelson. But (although arising from similar simple and plain-spoken origins), Pellew lacked the grace, devotion of subordinates, and Nelsonian quasi-religious martyrdom at Trafalgar. He suffered fools poorly, had no idea how to fit within London society (despite a term as MP), and became life-long enemies with Jervis (St Vincent), a figure whose style should have complemented Pelew's.

This is a very good read. Stephen Taylor wonders why our most common association with Pellew is fiction--Hornblower's mentor or the O'Brian hero's thinly disguised exploits. Good question. Because before rising to command ships of the line and to Flag Rank, Pellew took more French prizes than any other English captain. Interestingly, the French Captains Pellew captured seemed to believe Pellew among the best, and certainly the most honorable, of all English sailors.

Taylor tells a well-written and readable story, unearthing new details since the last "standard biography" (by C. Northcote Parkinson--it drove me nuts that Taylor failed to mention that Parkinson wrote five novels about an English frigate captain, some of whose exploits sound quite Pellew-ish). Taylor says Pellew's efforts to advance his own children and relatives "made a cat for his own back," surely the best quote from the book.

Mind you, Pellew did well -- he ended the war Vicsount Lord Exmouth -- but, as Taylor said, he was always "a parvenu." Nelson wasn't--had it not been for Lady Hamilton and the apotheosis of a death made for "Fox's Book of Martyrs," Nelson would have been First Lord. Taylor makes clear that it's impossible to imagine Pellew as anything but the simple Cornishman he was born to be. Taylor doesn't say so, but England needed simple Cornishman incapable of flattering the King almost as much as it needed Nelson.

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### **Susan Paxton says**

A well-written and carefully researched biography of one of the less well-known heroes of the Royal Navy during the wars against France, Sir Edward Pellew. Taylor's book is thorough, perceptive, and an excellent introduction to Pellew, who has become unfortunately mostly a footnote thanks to his role in one of C.S. Forester's Hornblower novels. Great reading, a fine and sympathetic portrait of a very complicated man, and highly recommended.

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## **Jonathon Dyer says**

Sir Edward Pellew - later Lord Exmouth - is one of the great, relatively unknown heroes of the Napoleonic era. Born of common stock, he acquitted himself as a sailor, tactician and leader of men from an early age in the American Revolutionary War (or the War of Independence, as the other side referred to it) in a boat battle against Benedict Arnold's forces in Canada, and went on to be one of the highest prize-takers in the British Navy. Captured enemy ships were taken as "prize", with the Navy essentially purchasing the ships to be inducted into their own navy, and the proceeds being split between the captain, officers and crew of the successful ship.

This success made Pellew both a very rich man and the toast of London; among his most ardent fans was none other than King George III himself. But it also earned him the resentment of many of his fellow officers and more than a few dedicated enemies who would undermine his career at every opportunity.

Remarkably, Pellew was held in high esteem by the French captains he defeated in battle, for his gallantry and the hospitality he afforded to them and their captured crews. A few even maintained warm correspondence through the course of the war and after.

Overshadowed by his exact contemporary, Horatio Nelson, and denied the opportunity of dying in battle as his rival did, he nonetheless completed his seagoing career with perhaps the most audacious and remarkable sea-borne sieges in British naval history.

Taylor presents a complete character, a man who was often brought down by his own deep flaws, but nonetheless was an extraordinarily capable sea-captain and admiral. Pellew had a talent building shipboard families, eliciting loyalty from the most cynical of sea-dogs, and recognising and raising talented up to his high standard. Dozens of men under his command went on to be boat and ship captains of good reputation. An eminently readable book about one of the unacknowledged heroes of the Napoleonic era.

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