The Significance of Patrick O’Brian’s *Master and Commander* as Historical Fiction

Historical fiction bears the noticeable characteristic of appealing to a relatively broad audience. Most historical fiction can be enjoyed without a particularly thorough acquaintance of the period in which it takes place, but the very same piece can entertain and delight those readers that possess a specialized knowledge of the time in which the events are set. The general reader may occasionally need to skip over a historically accurate term or some minor allusion to a current event of the period, but the overall effect is transportation to the past based on the effect of the chronological strangeness. The history expert would also experience a similar transportation with the added enjoyment of a type of intellectual complicity with the author’s intention: to recreate a living past capable of being explored beyond the pages of the historical novel. In this light, Patrick O’Brian’s novel *Master and Commander* is a prime example of an author’s painstaking attention to detail that ultimately renders a stunningly alive representation of naval life in the early nineteenth-century.

There is, in fact, a lot of discussion about bringing the past to life, especially when the topic is the historical novel. Some have examined the purpose of revisiting particular times such as writer Max Byrd:

It is worth thinking for a moment about why you want to bring the past back to life at all. Perhaps for the reason offered by Edmund Burke, that we have a moral duty to keep history warm and alive in our minds, to brood over it, because the past is an organic thing growing into us, or, to change the image, because it is the soil we are rooted in. (Byrd 30)

Byrd’s interpretation tends to oppose the modern view that history is only properly known through purely fact-based information regarded in a scientifically-oriented frame of mind. Furthermore, Byrd goes so far as to challenge the notion that history may be known in this way at all because of its “organic” nature, not to mention the implicit suggestion that it is possible for history to “die.” The idea that Byrd develops from Burke’s thinking is especially noteworthy because it envisions the past as a partially sentient entity existing in a relationship with those living in the present. The past may be viewed as a composite of not only the recorded accounts of famous people of all ages, but also the places they lived, the ideas they originated or refined, and the palpable depth of their feeling and essence that materializes in the mind of those re-experiencing those lives in the present. The past must be viewed in this way to legitimately rationalize any possibility of moral duty because that is an obligation usually found only between people.

Byrd is not alone in this vein of thinking. Andrew Beahrs expands on the notion in his piece on historical fiction:

Before going any further, it’s important to understand that authority in historical fiction—understood here as the ability to impart a sense of privileged knowledge about a vanished era—is always a fiction itself. The past is irretrievable; all the writer of historical fiction can do is decide what fragments are valuable and worthy of clinging to. (2)

The question that Beahrs’ interpretation immediately raises, however, is *how is the past irretrievable?* It is common knowledge that documents and eyewitness accounts tell us in the present that an event occurred in the past and even how it occurred, but Beahrs challenges the fundamental process though which history may be known. Beahrs continues a few sentences later:

And because the validity claims of historical fiction are not empirical, but artistic and emotional—this *feels* true, that false—it can have enormous influence, as when *Gone with the Wind* fixed a specific image of the antebellum South in the mind more surely than could any score of histories. (2)

It would seem then that the past is irretrievable if the method by which it may be known is through the common perception of the everyday world rather than via empirical information. The irretrievable nature of history is perhaps one part of the relationship that Byrd addresses. It is irretrievable from the perspective that past events cannot be delivered to our senses in the same manner that we normally experience them. Historical records leave a blank for the perception of experiences where we normally take many intuitive pieces of information for granted.

The two methods of approaching an understanding of history seem at first to be mutually incompatible: recording the factual accounts and romancing it with intelligent fictionalization. The necessities of writing historical fiction such as O’Brian’s requires the inclusion of impeccably accurate historical information, yet, conversely, the empirical approach at first seems to be diluted by any introduction of fiction writing devices. For example, Hayden White argues in the beginning of his article involving issues of contemporary historical theory that the use of narration in the field of historical theory is distinctly out of place:

Narration is a manner of speaking as universal as language itself, and narrative is a mode of verbal representation so seemingly natural to human consciousness that to suggest it is a problem might well appear pedantic. But it is precisely because the narrative mode of representation is so natural to human consciousness, so much an aspect of everyday speech and ordinary discourse, that its use in any field of study aspiring to the status of a science must be suspect. (White 1)

Narration is a cornerstone of any historical fiction perhaps because it is absorbed so readily and eagerly by the human consciousness as White has stated, and, given the support by Beahrs’ explanation of the power of imagery associated with *Gone with the Wind* over “any scores of history,” any effective method of keeping the past “warm and alive in our minds” must involve the telling of a story. That, of course, is the realm occupied by the historical novel.

Patrick O’Brian’s seafaring novel would seem to fulfill the requisites necessary to bring the past to the forefront of a reader’s mind in a way that other methods of viewing history may not. The idea of narration in relation to history cannot be overlooked too soon in this capacity. Much can be achieved by using narration in order to form a particularly vivid and alive depiction of the past, yet it is not devoted to the specific cause of historicity or any other beyond relating events. It may be subtly used by the author to influence the shape of the historical novel for the purpose of ensuring a certain effect on the reader. In this regard O’Brian has received critical attention for the scientific interests of one of his main protagonists, Dr. Stephen Maturin. Thomas Farrell is quick to point out a decision made by O’Brian concerning Maturin’s scientific interests:

The best extant criticism reveals the limits of emphasizing O’Brian’s historicity. Even while demonstrating the careful delineation in the novels of scientific debates at the turn of the nineteenth century, Wayne Glausser has remarked that discussions of biology omit the formidable figure of Lamarck in order to fend off the ‘looming corrective presence of evolution’: the suggestion is that O’Brian deliberately violates historical accuracy to prevent our misconstruction of Stephen Maturin’s convictions. (150-151)

Farrell’s tone is perhaps excessively harsh given that O’Brian’s actions are almost certainly not motivated by any intention to deceive the reader about scientific events of the period, but as Farrell himself offers, involves O’Brian’s desire for the reader to regard one of his main protagonists in a particular fashion. And while Wayne Glausser’s article does mention O’Brian’s omission as “quite noticeable” (75), it is from the perspective of Lamarck’s absence from all twenty novels, not simply from the first. To be quite honest, the attention to historical detail on O’Brian’s part is staggering if that is the most prominent criticism of his novels’ historicity. Nevertheless, the observation must be taken seriously because the way in which O’Brian has represented history is worthy of consideration: It is a marked example of the way O’Brian’s mode of storytelling does not achieve a precise historical representation. The purpose of character development and the value of retaining a proportional historical representation of scientific ideas diverge. Glausser’s article suggests from a historical standpoint two separate and plausible reasons why the omission of the scientist’s name and work go unnoted, although they too are followed with a similar opinion of the omission:

First, he could be considering that Lamarck was not as prominent a public figure during his lifetime as one might assume…Furthermore, some scholars have suggested that Cuvier’s calculated neglect of Lamarck contributed to his marginalization (Outram 126)1. Still, Lamarck was well enough known within natural philosophy to deserve mention somewhere, if the only criterion is historical accuracy. (76)

From this apparently rare example in O’Brian’s work it is evident that historical accuracy is not the only consideration in a work of historical fiction.

The occasional freedom from the constraints of a purely accurate historical context poses the writer of historical fiction with another point to consider, and one that is potentially much more important. The writer must make clear decisions as to the intention of the novel from the beginning in order to avoid having the work rend itself apart among tensions between historicity and creative license. A historical novel frequently seems to be split between historical faithfulness and an unspoken promise that it will not degrade into a tedious history lesson. Susan Swan has experienced a similar dilemma in her research before writing *What Casanova Told Me*. Swan had enlisted the help of an expert on Ottoman culture in order to lend the novel clear claims to historicity, and via that element, authenticity. As the research continued, and the constant correction from her correspondent wore her patience thin, Swan reaffirmed her purpose in writing the novel and placed the importance of the historian’s expert opinion into perspective after an argument over a particular scene:

I was fond of my scene with the Sultan and the dancers even if it was orientalist. My job was not to compile an accurate historical account but to create a story that the reader would enjoy and accept. Irvin had gone too far, I decided. He’d forgotten that a natural tension exists between the scholar and the novelist. Granted too much sway, the scholar’s insistence on historical accuracy could sink the imaginative flights of the writer. (387-388)

Swan not only asserts that it is not the concern of the writer to be completely dedicated to historical accuracy, she also explicitly removes any ambiguity over the place of history and narrative in a novel. While Farrell’s article calls attention to other minor inconsistencies in O’Brian’s novels as far as historicity and language are concerned, overall it tends to develop support for the rather bold and uninhibited declaration by Swan that all is ultimately dedicated to producing a work that will be found engaging to read.

It is important to maintain at the front of the mind, then, that although storytelling is instrumental in the creation of a believable, historically feasible world, it is merely the main tool the author uses to craft a work of historical fiction. The author does not aspire to be a historian, and the historical fiction does not strive to become a purely historical document. O’Brian and all writers of historical fiction write books that tell a story, and all stories rely on the author’s skill in that mode of writing. Historicity, then, is but a tool to serve the author’s purpose in the narrative. Later in Farrell’s piece, for example, he channels ideas from Gérard Genette to begin forming an assertion of the requirements of writing a narrative:

Gérard Genette’s terminology will be helpful in laying bare O’Brian’s narrative strategies by highlighting the degrees to which his novels emphasize either *mimesis*—that is, a strategy emphasizing (especially in historical fiction) the internal coherence of the “reality” being depicted, its correspondence to observed or experienced life—or *diegesis*—that is, a strategy willing to subordinate that fictional reality to what Genette calls the “function of […] directing the narrative”2; diegesis “bares the device” of mediation through the more or less obvious manipulation of character, action, and structure for narratological purposes. (152)

It is no great secret that O’Brian crafts a narrative in the pages of *Master and Commander*. His characters are fictitious even though he himself strongly hints that they are based on actual personalities (O’Brian 12). The characters, like the plot and devices used to create the narrative, are described as adhering to the term historicity when they match and conform to accepted historical records, and according to Farrell’s interpretation of Genette, earn the additional term of mimesis (152). On the other hand, if a plot or any part of its structure deviates from “the internal coherence of the ‘reality’ being depicted,” then it is a certain instance of the author exercising those necessary freedoms in the creation of a narrative, or resorting to a mode of diegesis (Farrell 152). The latter is a defining feature of historical fiction. The author’s willingness to use fiction may be as overt as deliberately creating anachronisms in the text, or as subtle as the possibly inadvertent omission of a historical figure such as in O’Brian’s novels.

An author such as O’Brian does not commit to folly when certain elements of his work appear to lie against the grain of all the rest in terms of historicity. Part of the writer’s endeavor is to lessen the impact of the contrast between what is fiction and what is historical fact to the least degree so as to give the illusion of a whole world. Conceivably, this concern is least pressing when dealing with characters, and some of whom the reader as a matter of course can expect to be fictitious even though they are based on real people. Fictitious characters are adept at sliding and bending into the gaps and crevices of partially or ambiguously recorded history. For example, O’Brian’s main protagonist Captain Aubrey, although fictional, is supposed to have served with Lord Nelson and even dined with him on two occasions (O’Brian 130). It is just this kind of freedom that serves the historical novel so well because it is plausible enough while simultaneously avoiding a plain conflict with historical accuracy. It is the characters themselves that offer the greatest chance of successfully fictionalizing history. Harry Liebersohn makes the point that O’Brian’s *Master and Commander* is dazzling in its attention to technical and general historical detail, but chooses to transcend this to avoid ultimately being bogged down by them:

Outsiders to naval life can hardly fail to be awed by the way he speaks this eighteenth-century language of the ship, the sailors and the Mediterranean as if he had grown up among them. A point-by-point rendering of the past would not in itself have attracted a wide readership to O’Brian’s novels. On the contrary, historical reenactments run a risk of boring their audiences by killing the past and pinning it down in reproducible stunts, then mechanically bringing it back to life3. But the Aubrey novels avoid this kind of lifeless accuracy, for they contain a countervoice, a hidden bass, which animates the whole and rescues it from its own wizardry and machinery. (Liebersohn 453)

It is little surprise that Liebersohn chooses to follow this observation in the next paragraph with an examination of the interaction between the three main protagonists of *Master and Commander*, and particularly where their personalities intersect and conflict. Furthermore, all three of those protagonists are fictional characters.

Thus, under the circumstances it paradoxically feels incorrect to refer to any character in a historical fiction as a fictitious character. If O’Brian has placed Aubrey at the battle of the Nile along with Nelson (439), then the purely fictional status of the character has been challenged. Farrell’s interpretation of diegesis faintly threatens to appear because the audience is aware at this point in the novel that Aubrey was not a real person, yet the battle at which he is placed is very real and documented, and so is his superior officer (Adkins 3). The character of Aubrey is totally fused with that battle and the period in general from the frequent and seamless juxtapositions. In this regard, the setting becomes inseparable from the people that inhabit it because the characters receive their literary lifeblood from the places in which they reside. D.W. Fenza has similarly commented that the setting itself loses part of its inanimate, fixed quality in the association as well: “One of the unique aspects of the historical novel is that the past is not just a setting; the past becomes elevated as a central protagonist and antagonist of the story…(“The Pleasures & Peculiar States of the Historical Novel”). This is another aspect of the past coming alive, and in this instance it is achieved by characters living and interacting with each other within its boundaries. While the environment has no dialogue, and at least in the case of *Master and Commander* it does not become an antagonist in the commonly understood meaning of the term (such as presenting a natural disaster or other similar physical obstacle that must be overcome), it contributes to the historicity and ambiance of authenticity with a share equal to that of the characters. In this regard, the setting is of equal importance when compared to the characters, fictional or otherwise, and under these circumstances the two have no choice but to intertwine to accomplish the goals of the historical novel.

A perfect example of the setting fusing with its characters is in the language of the period. The two are inextricably linked, and the characters receive a large dose of authenticity through the historical accuracy of specialized dialects and jargon. O’Brian himself is famous (or infamous) for his usage of the specialized language of sailing vessel crews of the early nineteenth century. The following is a manageable example that eavesdrops on a mumbling by Jack Aubrey concerning his frustrations over outfitting the *Sophie* just before the first departure: “’That despicable main-yard,’ he said. ‘And surely to God I can get a couple of twelve-pounders as chasers. Would her timbers stand it, though? But whether they can or not, the box can be made a little more like a fighting vessel—more like a real man-of-war’” (O’Brian 61). Captain Aubrey is referring at first to a yard, which is a particular beam of wood described as: “A long and narrow wooden spar, slung at its center from before the mast and in a square-rigged ship and serving to support and extend a square sail that is bent to it…” (King et al. 404). A cannon, or more appropriately a gun, on a ship was frequently referred to simply by the weight of the projectile it discharged, and so a twelve-pounder would be a gun capable of firing a twelve pound ball (Lavery, *Aubrey Commands* 46). The term “chaser” is described as: “A long gun with a relatively small bore, placed in the bow-port to fire directly ahead. Used especially while chasing an enemy vessel to damage its sails and rigging” (King et al. 103). Aubrey wonders if the “timbers” would withstand the force of the heavy discharging chaser, and that term literally referred to the wooden frame and planks of a ship made from cut and shaped timber (Lavery, *Ship of the Line vol. 2* 29-32). Finally, a man-of-war was a term used to describe a ship in this way: “A vessel armed for war and carrying between 20 and 120 guns” (King et al. 245). It is evident after even a few lines of this specialized language that it is the only way to describe the actions onboard a ship with any hope of efficiency, and moreover it is the only way it can be done while preserving the novel’s claim to historicity.

Another purpose of using such language presents itself when much longer stretches of argot appear. In these instances, the majority of the words are totally incomprehensible even when taken in the context of the scene. O’Brian takes these opportunities to showcase his truly stunning knowledge of ships and their operation, and they simultaneously serve to subtly construct a barrier of words between the action and the reader. O’Brian proceeds with the exposition filled with every imaginable nautical term at his disposal, and it may appear that he writes with much relish and no apology to the uninitiated. The effect, however, is one of alienation from the operation and daily life of the ship, and the proceedings are intended to evoke the element of the strange.

O’Brian’s novel is remarkable, however, in that the tension between the strange and the familiar becomes too great at intervals, and a sense of being overwhelmed by history is entirely possible, and it is very likely the aim of the writing. It produces an increasing unease that progresses to anxiety as the pages become more inaccessible to all but the most expert seafarers, and finally the feeling must be addressed directly: To experience O’Brian’s novel a reader must let go of any predisposition that he or she is in control of what is unfolding, and once that revelation has subsided, one becomes like a rider in a comfortable saddle on a sure-footed horse that knows the way.

Fortunately, and mercifully, O’Brian does eventually insert his protagonist Maturin into the action. Maturin is just as bewildered by the array of sailing orders and ship parts which instantly drives an identification with him. Maturin saves the novel from imploding upon its own language by providing a layperson on the deck of the *Sophie*, thereby becoming a lightning rod for well-meaning explanations by Aubrey and various crewmembers. An excellent example occurs when Mr. Mowett is tasked with showing Maturin the various parts of the ship at the request of Aubrey (O’Brian 107-115). Immediately, a sense of the familiar sweeps over the narrative as the extent of Maturin’s ignorance of ships becomes clear. Not only is Maturin ignorant of the names of sails and a multitude of other parts and their functions for much of his tour of the *Sophie*, but he is also obviously terrorized by being somewhat obliged to climb to the top of the masts in the rigging (O’Brian 108-109). Perhaps the most significant exchange between Maturin and Mowett, however, seems to be an anticipation on the part of O’Brian with regards to the difficulty of his text. Maturin seems clairvoyant in his ability to channel the most pressing and obvious question presented by the conversation with Mowett:

’You could not explain this maze of ropes and wood and canvas without using sea-terms, I suppose. No, It would not be possible.’ ‘Using no sea-terms? I should be puzzled to do that, sir; but I will try, if you wish it.’ ‘No; for it is by those names alone that they are known, in nearly every case, I imagine.’ (O’Brian 110-111)

If Swan’s claim served to highlight the freedom of the writer from historical minutiae, then O’Brian’s position as described by Maturin’s observation binds the writer to those necessary elements that ensure a display of historicity where it is most important. O’Brian’s novel would have been damaged beyond any recognition of a historical novel if he had chosen not to use his “sea-terms.” It is interesting and relevant to note that O’Brian did not regard the past periods in which his novels are set to be unfamiliar to him in the same way they are truly exotic to many in his readership. When asked in a piece of correspondence about interacting with the past, O’Brian appears to be completely in a familiar element:

The sensation of falling into the past is not unlike that of coming home for the holidays from a new, strenuous, unpleasant school, and finding oneself back in wholly familiar surroundings with kind, gentle people and dogs—inconveniences of course, such as candlelight in one’s bedroom (hard to read by) but nothing that one was not deeply used to. (Becker 6)

Whereas Swan had begun a relatively new line of research for *What Casanova Told Me* and found many of her preconceived ideas about the setting challenged by historical fact, O’Brian remains in the historical period he has obviously been immersed in for years and feels extremely comfortable with relating almost every germane historical detail. Both authors, however, still take liberties that narrative creativity not only allows, but at times seems to encourage.

The different ways in which the writer’s creative license affects the final shape of the historical novel can also be described by a comparison of Swan’s and O’Brian’s respective attitudes. The previous quotation by Swan is refreshing in its confessional tone. Swan had prepared in advance an effect that she wished to create in the scene in question: The images of stereotypical Turkish celebrations are too desirable to pass up, even if it does mean indulging in “orientalism” (Swan 387-388). It is misleading, then, to compare too directly Swan’s approach with O’Brian’s because she herself reveals difficulties in accepting and incorporating accurate depictions of Turkish life because, frankly, it is too familiar an image, and especially so for a western audience. Swan is supported in this stance by Jill Lepore, who develops a quotation from William Godwin:

The novelist is the better historian—and especially better than the empirical historian—because he *admits* that he is partial, prejudiced, and ignorant, and because he has not forsaken passion: “The writer of romance is to be considered as the writer of real history; while he who was formerly called the historian, must be contented to step down into the place of his rival, with this disadvantage, that he is a romance writer, without the arduous, the enthusiastic and the sublime licence [sic] of imagination that belong to that species of composition.” (82)

O’Brian, in contrast, seems almost smugly self-assured in his comfortable relationship with the past. O’Brian is not, however, above manipulating stereotypes or using narrative devices. Kristin Morrison deftly notes the visibility of the author’s hand in arranging an intended point of view and then changing it over time: “O’Brian’s attack on oversimplified notions of identity begins immediately with *Master and Commander* (1970), the first novel in his Aubrey-Maturin series. Here he gently invokes stereotypes and at the same time gradually undermines them” (340). One possible explanation for O’Brian’s use of stereotypes is to create an easily recognizable form that may serve as a rapid starting point that avoids excessive exposition (O’Brian revels in that task later with his descriptions). This dovetails neatly with a practical use of the familiar in a historical novel: A stereotype is a pre-constructed, nearly universally recognized unit of the familiar regardless of the actual accuracy of its depiction of real life, and once established may be disposed of or cultivated at will with every wax and wane of the strange. Morrison continues along the same lines later:

By first invoking adventure/romance stereotypes of character and plot, O’Brian wins his readers’ relaxed confidence by appearing to offer just a ‘good read’ (albeit at a high level of wit, allusion, and play of language). Then he gradually undermines those very simplifications, establishing the social and political criticisms that infuse his work. (Morrison 342)

The most obvious examples of O’Brian’s use of stereotypes in *Master and Commander* involve Aubrey and Maturin and their roles as bold, energetic captain and introspective, intellectual philosopher respectively (Morrison 340). Even by the end of the first novel, however, Maturin’s character is expanding beyond his initial boundaries by agreeing to steer the *Sophie* during the engagement with the Spanish ship *Cacafuego* even though he still refuses to engage in open combat with the rest of the crew (O’Brian 368).

After all that can be said about the malleable nature of characters in historical fiction, their subservience to the will of the author’s narrative, and their gradual development in relation to the elements of the familiar and the strange, by these qualities they are also most readily complimented by the authenticity developed by accurate historical references. O’Brian saves the most complex interaction with historical record for last. Aubrey’s ship is eventually captured by the *Desaix* and he is forced with his crew onto the French ship (O’Brian 420). As the action in the novel becomes clearer, the *Desaix* has been accompanied by the *Formidable* and the *Indomptable*, all of which are very shortly engaged in a large-scale battle with English ships near Gibraltar. O’Brian has placed Aubrey and Maturin in the midst of the famous battle of Algeciras Bay that took place on July 6th, 1801 (Rodger 471). The choice to involve fictional characters as spectators in a well documented historical event goes great lengths in developing the claim to historicity. In fact, it is one of the most powerful ways a writer may lay claim to historicity in a novel. This in turn leads to the novel acquiring a feeling of authenticity that spreads throughout the text because the events are described in such a way that they could have legitimately occurred.

O’Brian avoids the other distinctly potent method of instilling historicity into his novel, which is the detailed depiction of major historical figures, and possibly even narrating the novel from their points of view. It is a method that is by no means unapproachable, but Byrd addresses a few of the more pressing difficulties involved that he experienced when writing a novel based on Thomas Jefferson:

For me, there was an additional reason to avoid the first person. I had agreed to write about Thomas Jefferson, a man whose life and ideas are known in such detail by millions of people—and who is a personal hero to so many of them—that it would be arrogant, not to say foolhardy, to try to write in his voice. How could I dare? (31)

Byrd makes a strong point because so much is known and documented about a person of such great historical consequence that there is very little room for a writer to fictionalize beyond dialogues that contain little significance. And if a writer still chooses to write in the first person for that figure, the novel’s authenticity suffers even though the historicity may be supported by impeccable historical accuracy.

O’Brian ranges about so widely with his characters in *Master and Commander* that to completely avoid mentioning or meeting famous people may seem clumsy, again damaging the authenticity of the illusion of the past in the present. His solution is typical of his brand of humor, and he decides to have Aubrey serve with Lord Nelson in the Battle of the Nile (O’Brian 439). When it comes to actually meeting Nelson, Aubrey acknowledges that he has had the honor “of dining in his company twice” and recalls what Nelson said to him each time: “May I trouble you for the salt, sir?” and “Never mind manoeuvres, always go at them” (O’Brian 130). O’Brian does not pretend to assume the persona of Nelson for any extended time, and the first quotation indicates a sly mirth directed at the audacity of the thought in adopting the voice of Nelson. In fact, O’Brian has responded in an interview that speaking for a famous person in the first person is not generally a good idea:

Interviewer: You have remarked that it’s important not to put important statements in the mouths of celebrated people, Lord Nelson, say, and that one is pretty much limited to having him say such things as, “Please pass the salt.” O’Brian: yes, I think that’s so. I don’t really think you should. It’s horrible when important characters pontificate. (Becker 5)

In addition to being “horrible,” it is not generally necessary in historical fiction because the other inevitable fictional characters require enough time and energy to work into a historical context without inventing dialogue or internal monologue for well-known figures.

In the course of writing a historical fiction, however, it may become necessary to place a famous person at the center of the action as with Byrd’s work. In these cases, Byrd still insists on avoiding the first person perspective and offers another solution: “In the end, I couldn’t. I adopted what I called a carousel of voices or points of view revolving around him [Thomas Jefferson]” (7). The risk of damaging the authenticity of the novel, and the overall intended effect as a result, is too great when the writer attempts to fictionalize in a space already filled with massive quantities of historical record and zealous scrutiny. Coincidentally, the risk of major inadvertent historical inaccuracies increases as a logical consequence, and a writer only modifies factual history for clear, intentional purposes, and always at the peril of losing all claims to historicity.

O’Brian’s *Master and Commander* is a prime example of excellent historical fiction because of, among many reasons, the flawless attention to detail. When asked whether he had made any errors in his “sea material,” O’Brian curtly replied “No” (Becker 7). But more is required of a quality novel to “bring the past to life,” and that is the intelligent fictionalization of the gaps left in historical records while avoiding tempting but ultimately detrimental approaches. Sometimes that can even mean inventing spaces in which to squeeze fiction. O’Brian does all this exceedingly well, partly by combining the tension between the strange and the familiar in an intermingled web of historical fact and plausible speculation. The rest of the requirement of any good historical fiction is in the interest generated by an expertly crafted illusion of the living, breathing past.

Notes

1 Outram, Dorinda. Georges Cuvier: *Vocation, Science, and Authority in Post-Revolutionary France*. Manchester UP, 1984. Pg. 126.

2 Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Cornell UP, 1980. Pg. 165.

3 Boon, J.A. *Verging on Extra-Vagance: Anthropology, History, Religion, Literature, Arts…Showbiz*. Princeton UP, 1999. Chapter 5.

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