

## REFLECTIVE PAPER

POST CAPTAIN by Patrick O'Brien

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Definition: Post-captain is an obsolete alternative form of the rank of captain in the Royal Navy. In the royal Navy of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries an officer might be promoted from commander to captain, but not have a command, he was “on the beach” and on half-pay. An officer was made post when he was first commissioned to command a vessel. Usually this was a rated (significant) vessel. It was imperative to be “posted” in order to move up the seniority list to eventually become an Admiral.

Prequel:

James Aubrey, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, who has been passed over for a command, of his own, encounters Stephen Maturin, a destitute, Irish-Catalan physician and natural philosopher at a concert at the Governor's mansion. Aubrey and Maturin have a disagreeable encounter regarding Aubrey's beating time to the music and Maturin disagreeing with his tempo. Tempers flare and a duel will probably occur. Upon returning to his quarters, Aubrey finds a letter which is orders appointing him Master and Commander of the 14-gun HM Sloop *Sophie*. The next day, the elated Aubrey meets Maturin in the street and invites him to join him for breakfast. They discover that they have a love of music with Aubrey playing the violin and Maturin the cello. Aubrey learning of Maturin's profession, offers him the position of ship's surgeon for which Maturin is overqualified but due to his financial situation accepts.

The *Sophie* cruises the Mediterranean and is successful in capturing several private vessels and in defeating a much larger and better armed Spanish 32-gun frigate with the loss of life of a number of his crew, A significant victory such as this would normally

be highly rewarded but his superior, Captain Harte, does not award them since Aubrey is having an affair with his wife. On escort duty *Sophie* is captured by a squadron of 4 four large French warships. The captured officers are paroled to Gibraltar. Aubrey was court-martialed for the loss of his ship and was acquitted.

POST CAPTAIN begins with a potential battle aborted by the announcement of a short lived peace treaty, The Peace of Amiens. The action then moves to a country estate, Melbury Lodge, that Jack had rented. The Lodge had many rooms and Jack had invited Stephen and several members of his crew from the *Sophie*, "Sophieist", who were unemployed, to join him. At a fox hunt Jack encounters a beautiful young girl joining the hunt. Jack distracted by looking at the girl fell off his horse and was dragged across the field by a runaway horse. The girl lived in a neighboring estate, Mapes Court which was an entirely feminine household. Mrs. Williams headed the house which consisted of her three daughters and a niece. Sophia the eldest, age 27 was beautiful as was her cousin Diana Villers (relatively impoverished) also age 27 who was living with them after the death of husband and father in a battle in India. Jack courts Sophia, who is quite reticent and Stephen courts Diana who is also interested in Jack. Jack receives news that his prize-agent had not invested his monies but kept and then abscond to Italy. At the same time he was informed that the two ships that the *Sophie* had captured as prizes were in fact neutral and that Jack owed 11 thousand pounds (no explanation was given as to why the money was owed). Jack being penniless went to the Admiralty to request a small ship to act as a privateer. His meeting with the Admiral was a disaster and no ship was offered. Stephen was requested to find out if the Spanish would be joining the French if the peace treaty would be broken. Stephen and Diana have some harsh words. It is unclear where the relationship is going. Stephen is informed that the Sheriff's officers have come to arrest Jack. He finds Jack and they scurry off to France. They arrive in Toulon at the home Captain Christy-Palliere. While there they were informed that Bonaparte was going to break the peace treaty and that all the English were to be arrested. Stephen and Jack escaped to Stephen's house in Catalonia masquerading as bear (Jack) and it's handler Stephen. They finally made their way to Gibraltar where they embarked on the *Lord Nelson* a commercial vessel to return to England. The ship was attacked and taken by a French privateer the *Bellone*. The *Lord Nelson* was recaptured by a British squadron of war ships. Back on shore Aubrey was

offered the possibility of a ship by Lord Melville , the First Lord of the Admiralty. He was subsequently offered a letter of marque by a private merchant a Mr. Canning . Aubrey choose to command the HMS *Polychrest*, a ship that was built as an experimental weapon which did not work out. It was poorly designed and not built as a sailing vessel. In order to stay in the navy Aubrey takes the command. The first cruise of the *Polychrest* is unsuccessful in its search for prize ships but in the course of the cruise they do manage to drive a French privateer the *Bellone* aground. His arse is chewed by Admiral Harte who dislikes Aubrey (Jack had an affair with Harte's wife earlier in the narrative). Aubrey is assigned to escort convoys in the Channel and Maturin is sent on a secret mission. Aubrey spends many evenings on shore perhaps in a dalliance with Diana Villers which is well known to his superiors. Stephen and Jack have words about Diana and they end up agreeing to a duel. \_Before the duel can take place Aubrey is ordered to raid the French port of Chaulieu to sink French troopships and gunboats and to destroy the *Fancicilla* (this seems to me to be a suicide mission). A mutiny is planned by some members of the crew but Aubrey is warned by Maturin and is able to squash it. The *Polychrest* runs aground but the crew led by Aubrey is, successful in capturing the *Faniculla* a French warship), destroying the troop ships and refloating the *Polychrest*. The *Polychrest* sinks when it hits open water due to its bad construction and war wounds. Aubrey is seriously injured in the battle is treated by Maturin. Their friendship is resumed.

Aubrey returns to England in the "*Fanciulla*" and is promoted to post-captain. With debt still hanging over him he requests any available command (not his own ship). He is given the temporary command of *HMS Lively*. Maturin tells the head of naval intelligence that Spain will formally enter the war in alliance with France upon the arrival of four bullion loaded ships in Cadiz from Montevideo. At Maturin's urging, Sophie ask Aubrey to transport her and her sister to the Downs. Jack is too poor to propose marriage but they agree not marry anyone else. Sophia urges Stephen to propose to marry Diana but he declines to do so. He sees Diana with Canning and thinks she is being kept by him and is deeply disturbed.

Maturin, in repayment for his intelligence work, asks to be included in the squadron sent to intercept the Spanish treasure fleet. He is to become the negotiator for

their surrender. The Spaniards would not surrender and a battle ensues. One Spanish frigate explodes, the other ships strike their colors with the "*Lively*" capturing the "*Clara*" which carried the bulk of the treasure and having to chase the *Fama* which tried to escape. The tale ends with the Captains of the captured vessels dining in luxury in the cabin of the *Lively* and toasting Sophia or Sophie. The scene is set for the next volume of the epic series.