

JULIAN STOCKWIN

CONQUEST

A NEW DIRECTION IN HIS HISTORICAL FICTION

After the rousing triumph of Trafalgar, Thomas Kydd's creator now thrusts his hero into the race for empire.

By George D. Jepson

Julian Stockwin's CONQUEST launches a bright new chapter in Captain Thomas Kydd's naval career, as England turns to expansion of her empire in distant and exotic corners of the world after victory at Trafalgar in 1805. Kydd's saga continues to unfurl with Stockwin's crisp prose and attention to authenticity, which readers have come to expect.

The author recently addressed questions about the series and his new novel:

VICTORY, your eleventh book, was really a watershed for the series, wasn't it?

I guess that's true. That book culminated in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, where Nelson and the Royal Navy brought about an overwhelming defeat of Napoleon's combined French and Spanish fleets. Trafalgar is the last of the big set-piece naval battles in the Age of Fighting Sail. It also sees Thomas Kydd a post captain, an undreamable achievement for a wig-maker from Guildford who was press-ganged into the Navy just a dozen or so years previously, as a tiny handful actually did in the historical record.



A pensive Julian Stockwin contemplates the vastness of the ocean from the very tip of the African continent.

So CONQUEST marks the start of a new direction for your hero?

Yes. Victory at Trafalgar had two important consequences: it lifted the fear of invasion for England on the one hand and on the other it

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gave command of the seas to the Royal Navy which they immediately put to good use. One by one Britannia relieved the French of their possessions and added to her own, so by the end of the war in 1815 there was an empire that was truly global and which, even in my own lifetime, accounted for a quarter of the world's population. Kydd's adventures in CONQUEST therefore mark the start of an exciting new episode in his life: the race to empire, with the Navy playing a new and glorious role. This will be the focus of the books for the rest of the series.

How did you go about the research for CONQUEST?

As usual, my research consisted of a deep study of documents, reference books, maps and charts, pilots—plus actual location research. After completing my preliminary reading and taking copious notes it was off to South Africa, where the book is set! Kathy and I had the great privilege of visiting there in late 2009. We based ourselves in Cape Town where first we undertook a number of 'days' research at the excellent National Library of South Africa in Queen Victoria St and the Archives Repository in Roeland St. Several other smaller museums also yielded valuable material. Then, digital camera in hand, we explored the historical buildings of the city, many of which were there in Kydd's day. Foremost of these of course is the Castle of Good Hope, built in the seventeenth century by the Dutch East India Company. After that, it was on to the hinterland. Our travels took us all



The author with Table Mountain in the background.

around Cape Peninsula and to Simon's Town, among other locations. Simon's Town Museum proved another rich source of information. It is housed in a very picturesque building that was the winter residence for the Dutch East India Company Governor at the Cape.

The setting of Cape Town must be one of the world's most spectacular and we'd love to return

sometime. Of course, while we were there we also had to sample the delicious traditional cuisine—dishes such as bobotie, bredie and koeksisters, which are all mentioned in the book.

Any particular surprises during the research for CONQUEST?

The Skeleton Coast, where Kydd finds himself at one point in the

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story! This is the northern part of the Atlantic Ocean coast of Namibia. It's an amazing place—the upwelling of the cold Benguela current gives rise to dense ocean fogs for much of the year and the climate is incredibly arid and inhospitable. The coast is named for the bleached whale and seal bones on the shore, as well as the skeletal shipwrecks caused by sea hazards concealed by the fog. Today, more than a thousand vessels litter the coast. What amazed me is that such a barren landscape supports an incredible variety of wildlife—from elephants to lions to hyenas.

You dedicate the book to Lady Anne Barnard—who was she?

She was a splendid chronicler of the times, both via the written word and through her skills as an artist. She lived at Cape Town for five years and wrote a remarkable series of letters and diaries—and also produced a number of sketches and watercolours. Very much a “do-er,” I was not surprised to learn that she was the first English woman to climb Table Mountain! I was able to read her diaries, etc. in the Cape Town Library/Archives and also view her paintings. Dr Antony Lewin Robinson was director of the South African Library from 1961-1981, and was responsible for the acquisition of some of the original Lady Anne Barnard letters for the library in 1948. He made a special study of them over the years.

You sprinkle your books with real characters from history, some quite well-known, some not familiar to today's readers. In

CONQUEST, for example, Commodore Home Popham, who we first met in INVASION, plays an important role. What are the challenges for you as a writer in dealing with such personages?

Some historical figures have been extensively written about and I can also access their personal papers and diaries. Others have not left all that much to go on. However I have a very strong rule when writing about real people—I must be as true as I am able to the spirit of their character and times. Where possible, I try to use their actual words. With heroes like Nelson there is a huge amount of material to draw on, with someone like Popham, who also appears in future titles, there is perhaps not as much but he was an important—and controversial—figure in the Georgian Navy, and I had to evaluate quite a bit of material in order to present a true picture of the man.

How many more books do you envision in the series?

Goodness, it's probably double my original estimate of a dozen. The more I delve into the historical record the more potential I seem to uncover for new plots. At the moment I have comprehensive synopses for titles up to and including number 15, and pretty detailed outlines for following ones.

In VICTORY Kydd lost his beloved first command, HMS Teazer. He now captains the frigate HMS L'Aurore. One of the features of your books is that you give the reader the feeling that

individual ships all have a distinct personality. What marks out L'Aurore?

She was captured from the French; not a new ship, she had first kissed the waves at the time when Kydd, in *Artemis* frigate, had embarked on the voyage around the world that changed him from a youth to a man and formed him as a seaman. Because of her fine lines she is a fast ship and ghosts splendidly in fine airs, an extremely valuable attribute in a sea predator who may well find when the tables are turned that she needs every knot of speed to make her escape. It also means that with reduced hold capacity sea endurance is not her strong point. She is classed as a light frigate, pierced for twelve-pounders only, the lightest guns of all, so must be very wary of who she takes on. There is in her much for Kydd to love: her willingness to gallop in a fine quartering wind, the gracefulness of her light sparring, the old-fashioned but endearing gilt-work and her very comfortable captain's accommodation, useful for when, as a post-captain and ambassador for his country in far-away places, he has to entertain. Of course *Teazer* will always have a special place in Kydd's heart but *L'Aurore* is already proving worthy of his captaincy.

The cover of the book is particularly striking and somewhat of a departure from previous covers. What is the reason for this change?

With the move of my previous editor Anne Clarke to another publisher I have a new editor at

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Hodder & Stoughton, Oliver Johnson, a hugely experienced editor and a great fan of the genre. Oliver was keen for the cover of CONQUEST to reflect the new direction in the series and I'm delighted with the design Larry Rostant came up with. Larry is one of the top computer-generated-image designers around, and I certainly think he's set the scene of this new direction in the series extremely well.

CONQUEST will also be available as an ebook at the same time as the hardcover. What are your thoughts on ebooks as opposed to the more traditional formats?

I don't personally have any ebooks yet but I think they're a great idea: another way for my readers to consume the Kydd stories, especially if they're travelling and don't want to lug around heavy books. I'm also finding that people are reading my books as ebooks but still buying the hardbacks to cherish and perhaps hand down to the next generation.

Where will Kydd venture next?

South America! But I don't want to give away too much at this point. Just suffice it to say that it will have a quite different twist to CONQUEST.



George D. Jepson, a freelance writer/editor, formerly edited Quarterdeck and is a frequent contributor to WoodenBoat and Small Boats magazines.



Much of the Cape Town of Kydd's day survives; this building was the Governor's House.



The Castle of Good Hope.

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