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THE NAVAL WRITINGS OF JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

Chapter	Page
I Expansion, The Fleet, and Destiny	1
II Politics and the Navy	26
III Sailor and Novelist	51
IV The <u>History</u> and the <u>Lives</u>	81
V Bibliographies	110

PREFACE

The people of the United States have never exhibited an awareness of the function and purpose of a navy; in recent years the segment of the people which enters politics has been most naive in its consideration of a navy, especially as concerns the one time policy of Isolation. Even today, ask any American the greatest name in American naval history, and the answer will invariably be "John Paul Jones". This is symptomatic of lack of naval knowledge and naval thought when an unimportant battle between two small and unimportant vessels can survive as the most famous naval tradition of a powerful nation.

It is not a new phenomena that the public should think of the navy as a service whose functions are best limited to light opera. James Fenimore Cooper encountered similar thought in his day. Both sailor and author, Cooper continually registered amazement that in a country which had waged five wars on the sea, the navy should be relegated to a minor role when war was not actually threatening.

This study of Cooper's naval thought has been at least personally interesting for two reasons: first, it shows that the general interest in naval thought has remained static these last one hundred years; secondly, it attempts to develop the idea that Cooper was intensely patriotic, intensely nationalistic, and an intense believer in the theory that a war fleet could preserve the new and growing nation.

CHAPTER I

Expansion, The Fleet, and Destiny

The history of the United States Navy has been a record of frantic building in time of war, and equally frantic depletion in time of peace. The years since the late war have been filled with bitter squabbles in the American military arm as to the value of a navy under changed modes of warfare, until both professional and lay strategists have separated themselves into the traditional camps of "big navy" men and "small navy" men. One of the nation's first, and probably most outspoken "big navy" theorists was James Fenimore Cooper, sailor, author, social critic, and naval historian, not to say propagandist.

Cooper filled his sea tales with criticism of American naval policy and naval theory, and wrote a pioneer History of the Navy of the United States of America (1839). In his History Cooper developed his thesis of the world power role he envisioned for America and the need for a navy to hasten the nation's assumption of that role. The most succinct statement of Cooper's vision was given in the somewhat red-white-and-blue puff with which he ended his biography of Edward Preble, the commodore who directed the United States Navy squadron in the war on the Barbary pirates.

It is probable that the marine of this country, long ere the close of this century, will become one of the most powerful the world has yet seen. With a rate of increase that will probably carry the population of the nation up to 60 millions,

within the next 50 years (he hit this almost to the person), a commerce and tonnage that will be in proportion to these numbers, no narrow policy, or spurious economy, can well prevent such a result. In that day, when the opinions of men shall have risen in some measure to the level of the stupendous facts by which they will be surrounded, the world will see the fleets of the republic, feel their influence on its policy, and hear of the renown of admirals who are yet unborn; for the infatuated notion that wars are over, is a chimera of speculative moralists, who receive their own wishes as the inductions of reason. In that day, all the earlier facts of the national career will be collected with care, and preserved with veneration. Among the brightest of those which will be exhibited connected with the deeds of that infant navy out of which will have grown the colossal power that then must wield the trident of the seas, will stand prominent the forty days of the Tripolitan war, crowded with events that are inseparable from the name and the renown of Edward Preble. 1

This Nostradamus-like burst has been borne out in almost all phases.

Now Cooper was more than a shrewd novelist writing history with the hope of trading on patriotism. It is possible of course that he hastened preparation of the Navy manuscript to patch his purse after his thundering denunciations of much in American manners and morals in the six years since his return from Europe had made him a literary leper to newspaper and magazine editors and the public.

Even Burton's Gentleman's Magazine, which had mercilessly attacked Cooper's post-Europe productions and reviewed Homeward Bound (1838) with the comment that "he finds fault with everything American except his own immaculate self", in the issue for

1. Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers, 1846, I, 252, hereafter referred to as Lives.

September, 1839, praised both Cooper and the History in a two page review, but commented that "it is surprising that he of all people should have written it." But in the History, as in most of his novels, Cooper thought he had a message, or a series of them, and used the History as a speaking trumpet which would ring loud and clear. He believed in the accuracy of his History, as well as his qualification to write it, and the conviction cost him much time and money in libel suits that grew out of bickerings over details.

Cooper's "big navy" thought was not a matter of inspiration or chance political affiliation. He had shipped to England and the Mediterranean as a deckhand in an American merchantman in 1806-7. His ship, the Sterling, had been twice boarded at sea by the British, and several hands impressed. She had been chased by pirates, and Cooper was in a small boat that swamped in rough water. These events were to be reflected in his novels and the History. In 1808, when war with Great Britain threatened, Cooper was sent as midshipman to Lake Ontario and Lake Champlain to assist in ship building operations. Later he was sent to the Wasp, a navy cruiser under Captain James Lawrence of "Don't Give Up the Ship" fame. Astrologers could claim a cycle here, for the Cooper and Lawrence families had lived in adjacent houses in Burlington, New Jersey, where both Cooper and Captain Lawrence were born.

The war fever cooled in May, 1810, and early in the month Cooper wrote to his brother that "should nothing be done for the navy," he planned to resign his berth, and possibly to marry.

Apparently not enough was "done for the navy" for he stripped off his sword and uniform in favor of the marriage mantle and never again entered the military. Still, Cooper was never far from the sea and the navy. Even his language had a salty flavor; a few weeks before his death Cooper told a friend he thought "the old hulk was about to go into dry dock."

The Pilot, Cooper's first sea story, was a tale of the evolutions of two American naval vessels off the English coast in the Revolutionary war. The pilot, unnamed but understood to be John Paul Jones, flits in and out of the plot with all the nobleness of purpose of the Long Ranger, and, like that western worthy, collars the villains in due time. In sum, the plot is not important.

What is important, as regards Cooper's naval writings, is the choice of subject. He wrote of the American Navy making landings on the coast of England, fighting two successful naval actions, and coming off with the colors high; a theme well calculated to please popular taste, but showing that neither the British fleet nor homeland were invincible, a point at which he was to hammer mightily at a later date. The work was dedicated to William B. Shubrick, then a Commodore in the navy, and whose brother Cooper made the subject of a biography in the Lives.

It is probable Cooper paid honor to a former shipmate in The Pilot in the character of Captain Barnstable. In Cooper's deckhand days an old salt named Barnstable had helped the young sailor acquire the knots and knowledge of ships and sailing.

II

A naval historian must of necessity appreciate something of naval theory, the purpose of a navy, the relation of a navy to commercial and foreign policy, and the theory of naval tactics and strategy. Cooper possessed this appreciation, in a degree. He had served in the navy, but more than that he was familiar with the value of the English fleet to British imperialism, and his six years' residence in Europe had given him what may be termed a world view, the relation of commerce to naval war.

Perhaps it was a guess, and perhaps a theory of the balance of power role passing from England to the United States, but Cooper in Afloat and Ashore voiced a sentiment that smacks of shrewd prophecy at this day.

Stranger things have happened than to have the day arrive when English and American fleets may be acting in concert. No one can tell what is in the womb of time; and I have lived long enough to know that no man can foresee who will continue to be his friends, or a nation what people may become its enemies. 2

The Naval History was more than a record of the American marine, although the numerous battles were painted in typical minute Cooperesque. The work exhibited more foresight than hindsight, the vision of an expanding America supported by a giant fleet and a vigorous foreign policy. In the preface to the third edition of the History in 1846 Cooper could write:

The country appears to be touching on great events. A war has commenced among us, (Mexican War), which...must give extensive employment to the

2. Afloat and Ashore, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, p. 162.

national marine.... The Navy of the United States presents a very different picture, in 1846, from that it offered in 1815. Though far from being yet, what prudence would have dictated, and the wants of the republic actually demand, it can now bring its fleet into line, and exercise a most essential influence on the result of any conflict.

The phrase "what prudence would have dictated, and the wants of the republic actually demand," is the key to Cooper's naval thought. The knowledge that the American government had once paid tribute to the pirates of the North African coast rankled Cooper's personal and national pride. Connecting this fact with his theory of national rights Cooper wrote:

In May of this year (1800)...Captain Bainbridge was reordere*d* to sail with tribute (\$300,000, according to Cooper's note) to the Dey of Algiers. We now look back with wonder at the fact, that a maritime people, like those of the United States, should consent to meet the unjust demands of a power as insignificant as that of Algiers, with any other answer than a close blockade, and vigorous war.... Opinion had probably as much connexion with this want of spirit, as expediency or policy, for it would be easy to show, not only in this but all other cases, that there is no more certain means for a nation to invite aggressions, than by making undue concessions, or no surer method of obtaining justice than by insisting on its rights. 3

If insisting on rights meant war, then Cooper would have it so, for time and again he had written to the tune that "the infatuated notion that wars are over, is a chimera of speculative moralists."

The policies of expansion and insistence on rights could go hand in hand. In this vein Cooper wrote in Afloat and Ashore:

In a word, we shaped our course for that district (Oregon and Washington) which bids fair

3. History of the Navy of the United States of America, third edition, 1846, I, 185, hereafter referred to as History.

to set the mother and daughter by the ears, one of these days, unless it shall happen to be disposed of a la Texas, or what is almost as bad, a la Maine, ere long.... We went as far north as 53 degrees (latitude).... 4

The cry of the expansionists was "Fifty four-forty or fight!", and Cooper here had his hero Miles Wallingford going nearly that far north. The dispute was later settled with the boundary at the forty-ninth parallel.

Cooper exulted in the remembrance that the nation had "insisted on its rights" when the navy subdued the Barbary pirates.

Algiers will not extort tribute again from America, but other rights, not less dear to national honour, national character, and national interests, may be sacrificed to a temporising spirit, should not the navy be enlarged, and made the highest aim of national security. 5

National security meant a navy to Cooper, and a navy meant policy and administration. Naval policy had to be engendered by the congress, eventually approved by the voting public, and administered by a civilian navy department. Here, then, were themes that required outlining. The navy, in 1812, had been "distrusted by those who, having made the cry of economy a stalking horse in their way to power, shrunk from the heavy charges that this, like all other complete means of national defence, must unavoidably entail on the public." 6

False economy was an evil peculiar to a democracy.

In a democracy there exists a standing necessity for reducing everything to the average comprehension....

4. Ibid., p. 191.

5. History, II, 151.

6. Ibid., I, 194.

...this compromise of knowledge, is to be found in the want of establishments that require foresight and liberality to be well managed, for the history of every democracy has shown that it has been deficient in the wisdom which is dependent on those expenditures that foster true economy, by anticipating evils and avoiding the waste of precipitation, want of system, and want of knowledge. ...as in ordinary transactions, (where) the highest pay commands the best services, so in public things, the expenditures made in a time of peace are the surest means of obtaining economy in a time of war. 7

The onslaught on false economy was not limited to the strictly naval commentaries. The theme popped up in many of the sea tales, notably Miles Wallingford:

As for America, she was cursed with the cant of economy.... The money paid as interest on the sums expended in the war of 1812, might have maintained a navy that would have caused both belligerents to respect her rights, and thereby saved the principle entirely, to say nothing of all the other immense losses dependent on a interrupted trade, but demagogues were at work with their raven throats, and it is not reasonable to expect that the masses can draw very just distinctions on the subject of remote interests, when present expenditure is the question immediately before them. 8

Accompanying the advocacy of a big fleet as true economy went a suggestion for naval research.

It is by making provision for war, in a time of peace, and, in expending its money freely, to further the objects of general science, in the way of surveys and other similar precautions, that a great maritime state, in particular, economizes, by means of present expenditure, for the momenta of necessity and danger that may await it, an age ahead. 9

Naval policy was to be dictated by national interest.

7. History, I, 190-191.

8. Miles Wallingford, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, p. 169.

9. Lives, I, 44-45.

It follows that America was about to engage in a war (1812) with much the greatest maritime power that the world ever saw, possessing herself but seventeen cruising vessels (war ships) on the ocean, of which nine were of a class less than frigates. (Britain entered this war with 686 naval vessels, including 120 ships of the line and 145 frigates. 10) At this time the merchant vessels of the United States were spread over the face of the entire earth. No other instance can be found of so great a stake in shipping with a protection so utterly inadequate.

If any evidence were wanting to show how much facts precede opinion in America, it would be amply furnished in this simple statement. ...the navy has followed the exigencies of the state, or the absolute demands of necessity, instead of having been created, fostered, and extended, as the cheapest, most efficient, and least onerous means of defense, that a nation so situated could provide. 11

III

It is interesting to compare Cooper's naval thought with that of later naval historians. Captain Alfred T. Mahan, probably the world's most astute naval historian and theoretician, writing in 1890 said:

The necessity of a navy, in the restricted sense of the word, springs, therefore, from the existence of a peaceful shipping, and disappears with it, except in the case of a nation which has aggressive tendencies, and keeps up a navy merely as a branch of the military establishment. As the United States has at present no aggressive purposes, and its merchant service has disappeared, the dwindling of the armed fleet and general lack of interest in it are strictly logical consequences. When for any reason sea trade is again found to pay, a large enough shipping interest will reappear to compel the revival of the war fleet. It is possible that when a canal route through the Central American Isthmus is seen to be a near certainty, the aggressive impulse may

11. History, II, 40.

be strong enough to lead to the same result. This is doubtful, however, because a peaceful, gain-loving nation is not farsighted, and farsightedness is needed for adequate military preparation, especially in these days. 12

This last line concerning "far-sightedness" smacks of Cooper's big fleet propaganda, although the brief paragraph should serve to demonstrate that Mahan's work has survived largely because he dealt with principles educating generalities from them.

And fifty years later the arguments of the big navy men were to be essentially the same as Cooper's. Captain Dudley Wa Knox, in the introduction to his History of the United States Navy, 1936, theorized:

We are, and always have been, a great commercial nation; which beginning with the Declaration of Independence, has never failed to assert its right to trade freely with all the world. We cannot doubt that in the future we shall maintain our commercial rights, even at the risk of war, and that the Navy will be the instrument of upholding them.

In the conflict of national interests we usually find the origin of wars, and every country knows that the diplomatic arguments of its State Department are effective in proportion as they are supported by military and naval force in the background. 13

It should be clear, then, that a vital relation exists between the size of the navy and the maritime trade of a nation, and although, as demonstrated, Cooper perceived this relation, the extension of this thought results in one of the many foggy and somewhat contradictory expressions of his nature. Cooper always used the terms "merchants" and "wealthier citizens" in a synonomous sense, and made no bones about the fact that he despised

12. Capt. A.T. Mahan, The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, Little, Brown, and Company, Boston, 1890, p. 26.

13. Capt. Dudley W. Knox, History of the United States Navy, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1936,

commerce, being ready to charge merchants with near treason:

It ought never to be forgotten, moreover, that the wealthier portion of the American people, who, as a body, have seldom been true to the nation, in conflicts of opinion with Great Britain, allowed their confidence in the public securities to be so much impaired, that all the heaviest operations of Commodore Chauncey were carried on by means of a depreciated currency.... 14

Furthermore, Cooper believed that cities could be defended from ships by means of forts. He stated this not once, but several times.

This was the most hotly contested engagement of the king that ever took place on the American coast, and it goes fully to prove the important military position, that ships cannot withstand forts when the latter are properly constructed, armed, and garrisoned. 15

While it would be going too far afield to make a definite assertion, it does make an interesting conjecture that since Cooper felt no personal love for the merchant and importer, and believed the nation could successfully be defended from invasion by means of armed forts and coast artillery, his big navy thought stemmed almost solely from a belief in the power role of American destiny.

In the History Cooper went to great lengths to show that the navy had contributed invaluable service to the nation in the two wars with England.

The first important relief was obtained through the cruisers (during the revolution), and it is scarcely too much to add, that, without the succours that were procured in this manner during the years 1775 and 1776, the Revolution must have been checked at the outset.

14. History, II, 228.

15. Ibid., I, 70.

In addition to the direct benefits conferred by the captures, the marine was of incalculable advantage in bringing Europe in contact with America by showing the flag and ships of the new country in the old world. 16

Despite such lessons as this, Cooper thought, it was a "known national failing to defer all military preparations to the latest possible moment, from the day the country has been peopled." 17

Cooper stood ready with his examples and theories to forestall all protestations that navies cost money. He had thundered against false economy on several occasions, and dipped into history for more material.

While Washington, and his ministers, appeared to be fully sensible of the importance of a navy, the poverty of the treasury alone would have been deemed in insuperable objection to encountering its expense. Still, so evident was the connexion between an efficient government and a permanent and strong marine, in a country like this, that when Paul Jones first heard of the change, he prepared to return to America in the confident hope of being again employed. 18

And not only was there a close "connexion between an efficient government and a permanent and strong marine," but it was a force that "without which no war can ever be conducted with credit and success by a country situated like America...." 19

If the navy had not received its due share of recognition, it had manifestly been the fault of the congress. Politicians, then, should be scored without mercy.

16. History, I., 141.

17. Ibid., p. 28.

18. Ibid., p. 147.

19. Ibid., p. 45.

The recklessness of political opposition soon made itself apparent, in its usual inconsiderate and acrimonious form; a recommendation that emanated from the government, for the establishment of dry docks, one of the first and most important measures in the formation of serviceable marine, meeting with all the ridicule and ignorance which hostility could invent, even from those who professed to be the strongest friends of the navy. Profiting by the most vulgar association that a want of knowledge could connect with the word "dry", the papers of the day kept ringing the changes on this tune, virtually accusing the administration of wishing to have a navy on shore! Thus did the gallant little service, which already merited so much from the nation, and which is so inseparably connected with all the great considerations of national existence, find itself to struggle through its infancy.... 20

Further, it was patent that a navy, and only a navy, could insure the trade, freedom, and very national existence of the United States, and yet the national legislature had shown little recognition of this vital fact.

The condition of the navy may be said to have been negative at the period of which we are now writing, (1805), for while all who reflected seriously on the subject, felt the necessity of greatly increasing this branch of the national defence, nothing efficient was attempted, or, apparently, contemplated. Ships of the line, without which it would be impossible to prevent any of even the secondary maritime powers of Europe from blockading the ports of the country, were now scarcely mentioned.... It is, indeed, difficult to imagine a policy as short-sighted and feeble, as that pursued by Congress at this particular juncture. With political relations that were never free from the appearances of hostilities, a trade that covered all the seas of the known world, and an experience that was replete with lessons of the necessity of repelling outrages by force, this great interest was treated with a neglect that approached fatuity. To add to this oversight, and to increase the despondency of the service...the government adopted a...policy... (gun boat policy) singularly adapted to breaking down the high tone that the navy had acquired in its recent experience. 21

20. History, I, 194.

21. Ibid., II, 10.

Cooper had neither love of nor fear for the English, and scoffed at the suggestion that England could reconquer America, provided, of course, the navy were maintained at peak strength.

The general peace that, owing to the downfall of Napoleon so suddenly took place in Europe, afforded England an opportunity of sending large reinforcements in ships and troops to America. ...and it would seem, that there was a moment when some in England were flattered with the belief of being able to dictate such terms to the republic, as would even reduce its territory, if they did not affect its independence. 22

Even when instances occurred where the Congress had made some naval preparations, Cooper presented the situation in a most unfavorable light.

If the naval armaments made by the country, under the prospect of a war with Great Britain, are to be regarded with the eyes of prudence, little more can be said, than to express astonishment at the political infatuation which permitted the day of preparation to pass unheeded. Still a little was done, and that little it is our duty to record. 23

Despite all the failures of the legislative body to properly provide for the maintenance of the military arm, Cooper wrote, the navy had, through the course of events developed into a superb fighting organization, and the war of 1812 had witnessed the birth of a new world power from a new nation.

Thus terminated the war of 1812, so far as it was connected with the American marine. The navy came out of this struggle with a vast increase of reputation. The brilliant style in which the ships had been carried into action...produced a new era in naval warfare. ...The ablest and bravest captains of the English fleet were ready to admit that a new power was about to appear on the ocean, and that it was not improbable the battle for the mastery of the seas would have to be fought over again. 24

22. History, II, 133.

23. Ibid., p. 39.

24. Ibid., pp. 244-245.

The key phrase here is "a new power was about to appear on the ocean," for in 1839, when the History was published, the battle efficiency of the increasing United States fleet had not yet been tested. Still, the power was there, "dormant power, which, when properly applied, can at any time give the republic a commanding influence in the general concerns of the world...." 25

But Cooper's big navy propaganda was not a blind booming of a service to which he was most partial and in which he could number the leading figures as his personal friends. This navy was to support a foreign policy of expansion, an expansion that was manifestly destined for the growing nation. Cooper could comment on the diplomatic and philosophical implications for the creation of the United States: that not only was the Revolution the "birthday of the nation, but it was also the era when reason and common-sense began to take the place of custom and feudal practices in the management of the affairs of nations." 26 And he could go from the general to the particular in passing along to the reader of fiction the late naval developments and the reasons for such moves.

Of late years, the government of the United States has turned its attention to the capabilities of the Florida Reef, as an advanced naval station; a sort of Downs, or St. Helen's Roads, for the West Indian Seas. As yet, little has been done beyond making the preliminary surveys, but the day is not probably very distant when fleets will lie at anchor among the islets described in our earlier chapters, or garnish the fine waters of Key West. For a long time it was thought that even frigates would have difficulty in entering and quitting the port of the latter, but it is said that recent explorations have discovered channels capable of admitting anything that floats. 27

25. History, II, 8.

26. The Pilot, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, p. 1.

27. Jack Tier, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, p. 452.

Today Key West is a major base for surface craft and submarines.

Cooper's daughter, Susan, would have it that her father had some large scale ideas about South America. "Your grandfather," she wrote in the "Small Family Memories" penned for the grandchildren, "Your grandfather thought the intercourse with the Spanish-American countries would become so close that the language would become a necessity to an educated American." ²⁸ It is certain that Cooper exulted when the United States military forces moved into the Mexican section of Spanish-American. Of General Scott in Mexico he wrote, February 1, 1848: "Has not Scott achieved marvels! The gun-thunders in the valley of the Aztecs were heard in echoes across the Atlantic." ²⁹ Here, then, was a warning to Europe, But while Cooper thought that Europe heard the echoes, he wondered whether most Americans might have a less sensitive ear; a failing of both Americans and Europeans at an earlier date.

The Leander (British war vessel) afterwards became notorious, on the American coast, in consequence of a man killed in a coaster by one of her shot, within 20 miles of the spot where I saw her now, an event that had its share in awakening the feeling that produced the war of 1812---a war of which the effects are just beginning to be made manifest in the policy of the republic; a fact, by the way, that is little understood at home or abroad. ³⁰

28. Correspondence of James Fenimore-Cooper, ed. by James Fenimore Cooper, Yale University Press, 1932, I, 56, hereafter referred to as Correspondence.
29. Mary E. Phillips, James Fenimore Cooper, John Lane Company, New York, 1913, p. 368.
30. Miles Wallingford, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, p. 171.

IV

The theme of the American destiny of expansion is strong in all of Cooper's sea tales, and sometimes the destiny theme approached the cyclical theory as advanced by Spengler in The Decline of the West. In the Red Rover, (1828) the second of the sea stories, a story centered in New York harbor in the early 1700's, Cooper wrote:

The system of oppression and misrule, which hastened a separation that sooner or later must have occurred in the natural order of events, had not yet commenced. 31

Here was the destiny of freedom; and later:

The crew of the Royal Caroline were all from that distant island (England) that has been, and still continues to be, the hive of nations, which are probably fated to carry her name to a time when the site of her own fallen power shall be sought as a curiosity, like the remains of a city in a desert. 32

Here was the decline of the west. True, these are isolated statements, but they are out of the pattern of the narrative, asides to the reader, as it were, and are repeated in sentiment in the other yarns.

Cooper entertained little love for England; if she was considered "Mistress of the Seas", he had no fear of a woman, and wanted his nation to assume the role of master. Cooper rarely mentioned the subject of naval impressment, in which England had been the prime offender, without delving in war psychology:

31. Red Rover, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, p. 3.

32. Ibid., p. 212.

It may sound revolting, at the present day, to suppose a case in which a foreigner was thrown by violence into the military service of a nation, and then was put in jeopardy of his life, because he used a privilege of nature to fly from such persecution as soon as circumstances placed the means in his power. The last age, however, witnessed many scenes of similar wrongs; and, it is to be feared, in despite of all the mawkish philanthropy and unmeaning professions of external peace that is now the fashion to array against the experience of mankind, that the next age will present their parallels, unless the good sense of this nation infuse into the federal legislative bodies juster notions of policy, more extended views of their own duties, and more accurate opinions of the conditions of the several communities of Christendom, than has marked their laws and reasoning for the past few months. (1.)

(1.) The question of impressment is now settled forever. The United States have now a mortgage on the Canadas to secure the good behavior of Great Britain. 33

This footnote, of a most belligerent tone, was added to the 1850 edition of *Wing-and-Wing*, but the tone of the original passage typical of many Cooper denunciations of impressment, is fat with threats of wars and rumors of wars.

With the entry into the Mexican War, the United States had begun to fulfill the grand destiny that Cooper and other had envisioned, and Cooper felt no call to apologize for the nation's wholesale extension of its borders.

Of his native country (United States), so abused in our own times for its rapacity and the desire to extend its dominions by any means, Mark felt no apprehension. Of all the powerful nations of the present day, America, though not absolutely spotless, has probably the least to reproach to herself with the score of lawless and purely ambitious acquisitions. Even her conquests in open war have been few, and are not yet determined in character. In the end, it will be found

that little will be taken that Mexico could keep; and had that nation observed towards this, ordinary justice and faith in her intercourse and treaties, that which has so suddenly and vigorously been done, would never have been attempted.

It may suit the policy of those who live under the same system, to decry those who do not; but men are not so blind that they cannot see the sun at noonday. One nation makes war because its consul receives the rap of a fan; and men of a different origin, religion, and habits, are coerced into submission as the consequence. Another nation burns towns, and destroys their people in thousands, because their governors, will not consent to admit a poisonous drug into their territories; an offence against the laws of trade that can only be expiated by the ruthless march of the conqueror. Yet the ruling men of both these communities affect a great sensibility when the long slumbering young lion of the West arouses himself in his lair, after twenty years of forbearance, and stretches out a paw in resentment for outrages that no other nation, conscious of his strength, would have endured for as many months, because, forsooth, he is the young lion of the West. Never mind: by the time New Zealand and Tahiti are brought under the yoke, the Californians may be admitted to an equal participation in the rights of American citizens. 34

America, then, had not been an aggressor in Mexico, but had lashed back for a series of insults, and, apparently, once the young lion took up a new piece of ground, he merely declined to decamp. It should be noted in line with Cooper's suggestion that "little will be taken that Mexico could keep," that the diplomatic meaning of the Gadsden Purchase could be construed in this light.

More than once does Cooper give the suggestion that he believed not only in the rise of the United States as a great

34. The Crater, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, p. 309.

power, but that he believed in the whole idea of a great cycle and eventual perfection. This is, perhaps, most strongly voiced in the Crater.

In the meantime, the earth revolves, men are born, live their time, and die; communities are formed and are dissolved, dynasties appear and disappear; good contends with evil, and evil still has its day; the whole, however, advancing slowly but unerringly towards that great consummation, which was designed from the beginning, and which is as certain to arrive in the end, as that the sun sets at night and rises in the morning. The supreme folly of the hour is to imagine that perfection will come before its stated stime. 35

It is strange indeed to hear Cooper advocating patience as regards human failings, for no one was more impatient than he with the slowly progressing American.

But patience between nations had its breaking point, and such was the case with Mexico.

However much Mexico may, and has, weakened her cause by her own puny faith, instability, military oppression, and political revolutions, giving to the Texans in particular ample justification for their revolt, it was not probable that Don Juan Montefalderon saw the force of all the arguments that a casuist of ordinary ingenuity could certainly adduce against his country; for it is a most unusual thing to find a man anywhere, who is willing to admit that the positions of an opponent are good. He saw in the events of the day, a province wrested from his nation; and, in his reasoning on the subject, entirely over-looking the numerous occasions on which his own fluctuating government had given sufficient justification, not to say motives, to their powerful neighbors to take the law into their own hands, and redress themselves, he fancied all that had occurred was previously planned; instead of regarding it,

as it truly is, as merely the result of political events that no man could have foreseen, that no man had originally imagined, or than any man could control. 36

Here is destiny at its ultimate, blind, moving, unforeseen, uncontrollable. Still while no man could hope to control such forces, a big fleet kept the forces from moving toward one's homeland.

'The United States of America!' repeated the interpreter, with an ill-concealed expression of contempt. 'There is good picking among the vessels of that nation, as the great European belligerents well know; and while so many are profiting by it, we may as well come in for our share.'

It may be necessary to remind a portion of our readers that his dialogue occurred more than forty years ago, and long before the republic sent out its fleets and armies to conquer adjacent states; when, indeed, it had scarce a fleet and army to protect its own coasts and frontiers from insults and depredations. 37

Not only was Cooper well satisfied with the conquests in Mexico that were adding to the physical size as well as the international prestige of the United States, but he exulted in the force of American arms.

The warlike qualities of the Americans of the North, as he was accustomed to call those who term themselves, par excellence, Americans, a name they are fated to retain, and to raise high on the scale of national power and national pre-eminence, unless they fall by their own hands, had taken him by surprise, as they had taken all but those who knew the country well, and who understood its people. Little had he imagined that the small, widely-spread body of regulars, that figured in the blue books, almanacs, and army-registers of America, as

36. Jack Tier, pp. 153-154.

37. The Crater, p. 437.

some six or seven thousand men, scattered along frontiers of a thousand leagues in extent, could, at the beck of the government, swell into legions of invaders, men able to carry war to the capitals of his own states, thousands of miles from their doors, and formidable alike for their energy, their bravery, their readiness in the use of arms, and their numbers. He saw what is perhaps justly called the boasting of the American character, vindicated by their exploits; and marches, conquests, and victories that, if sober truth were alone to cover the pages of history, would far outdo in real labor and danger the boasted passage of the Alps under Napoleon, and the exploits that succeeded. 38

Sometimes Cooper's predictions of America's destiny were both optimistic and calm, where for the most part he was advocating an expanding America while condemning the caliber of her people, her institutions, and her political administrations. In the *Sea Lions*, (1849) probably the best of the sea tales, Cooper suggested hope for both the nation and her people.

Nevertheless, the world cannot probably another instance of a people who are derived from so many different races, and who occupy so large an extent of country, who are so homogeneous in appearance, characters, and opinions. There is no question that the institutions have had a material influence in producing this uniformity, while they have unquestionably lowered the standard to which opinion is submitted, by referring the decisions to the many, instead of making the appeal to the few, as is elsewhere done. Still, the direction is onward, and though it may take time to carve on the social column of America that graceful and ornamental capital which it forms the just boast of Europe to possess, when the task shall be achieved, the work will stand on a base so broad as to secure its upright attitude for ages. 39

38. Jack Tier, p. 305.

39. Sea Lions, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, p. 2.

By the time Cooper was writing The Sea Lions, in 1848 and 1849, the American navy had come a long way from the "infant service" of which Cooper was so proud of having been a member. That fleet had cowed the pirates of the Mediterranean, Caribbean, and Malay Archipelago; opened trade with China, and attempted negotiations with Japan; served in reducing Mexican armies during the war; made a five year exploring expedition under Lt. Charles Wilkes from the Antarctic through the whole Pacific, ending in 1843; and on down the line. This naval activity is reflected in such later sea tales as The Sea Lions in the boast that:

No hostile squadron, English, French, Dutch, or all united, will ever again blockade an American port for any serious length of time, the young Hercules passing too rapidly from the gristle into the bone, any longer to suffer antics of this nature to be played in front of his cradle. 40

And not only could Cooper thus snap his fingers at the combined naval power of the English, French, and Dutch, but he could cock a somewhat greedy and belligerent eye at the British owned Bermudas.

Beaufort (N.C.) lies about two degrees to the northward of the four hundred rocks, islets, and small islands which are known as the Bermudas; an advanced naval station that belongs to a rival commercial power, and which is occupied by that power solely as a check on this Republic in the event of war. Had the views of real statesmen prevailed in America, instead of those of mere politicians, the whole energy of this Republic would have long since been directed to the object of substituting our own flag for that of England in these islands. As things are,

there they exist; a station for hostile fleets, and receptacle for prizes, and a depot for the munitions of war, as if expressly designed by nature to hold the whole American coast in command. While little men with great names are wrangling about southwestern acquisitions, and the northeastern boundaries, that are of no real moment in the growth and power of the Republic, these islands, that ought never to be out of the mind of the American statesman, have not yet entered into the account at all; a certain proof how little the minds that do, or ought to, influence events, are really up to the work they have been delegated to perform. Military expeditions have twice been sent from this country to Canada, when both the Canadas are not of one-half the importance to the true security and dependence of the country---no nation is independent until it holds the control of all its greater interests in its own hands--as the Bermudas. When England asked the cession of territory undoubtedly American, because it overshadowed Quebec, she should have been met with this plain proposition--'Give us the Bermudas, and we will exchange with you. You hold these islands as a check on our power, and we will hold the angle of Maine for a check on yours, unless you will consent to make a fair and mutual transfer. We will not attack you for the possession of the Bermudas, for we deem a just principle even more important than such an accession; but when you ask us to cede, we hold out our hands to take an equivalent in return. The policy of this nation is not to be influenced by saw-logs, but by these manifest, important, and ulterior interests. If you wish Maine, give us Bermuda in exchange, or go with your wish ungratified.' Happily, among us events are stronger than men; and the day is not distant when the mere force of circumstances will compel the small-fry of diplomacy to see what the real interests and dignity of the Republic demand, in reference to this great feature of its policy. 41

In addition to the specific suggestion that the United States acquire the Bermudas, Cooper here once more registered his belief in destiny, manifest destiny amounting almost to an astrological

assumption--"events are stronger than men", nothing could prevent American expansion. Further along in The Sea Lions, Cooper could put this speech into the mouth of Roswell Gardiner, the hero: "We're beginning to put out our feelers, Old Stimson, and shall have 'em on far better bits of territory than this (uncharted Antarctic island), before the earth has gone round in its track another hundred years." ⁴² Here, again, Cooper approached clairvoyance; in 1941, ninety-two years after the publication of The Sea Lions, the United States received naval bases in the Bermudas in exchange for a gift of fifty Destroyers to the English navy.

CHAPTER II

Politics and the Navy

Probably the extent of Cooper's political activities and his political relations with the Navy Department will never be known. The evidence is just enough to be intriguing, too little to be conclusive. Still, the available material serves to show Cooper was close to governmental and navy leaders, and that his big-navy and expansionist ideas fruited from a period of long and steady growth.

Among Cooper's brother officers during his brief hitch in the Navy were several who were destined to reach positions at the head of the service, W.B. Shubrick, C.C. Chauncey, Lawrence Kearney, W.M. Woolsey, and others. After leaving service, and especially after his success as a novelist, Cooper maintained his personal relations with military men. Susan Cooper wrote that on removing to New York from Cooperstown her father frequently saw many officers of the army and navy; and at least once brought home to dine one of the nation's heroes, General Winfield Scott.¹ At this time, or earlier, Cooper had learned something of the naval history of Holland, for he kept a 20 foot sloop called the Van Tromp, obviously named for the Dutch Admiral Van Tromp, still called by naval men the "father of naval tactics."

1. Correspondence, I, 49.

When ready to embark for Europe, Cooper believed himself well enough known to request a consulship in Lyons. In 1826, at a dinner given in his honor before sailing, Cooper made known his intention to write a history of the navy. Here was a combination of politics and the navy.

Once in Europe Cooper did not forget his pride in the United States Navy. Writing to his wife from Genoa in February, 1827 he said, "There is a French corvette here, and I went on board her this afternoon. She carries twenty-two guns, but I think one of our 22's would soon dispose of her." ² Undoubtedly Mrs. Cooper would have some idea of the relative merits of a French corvette and "one of our 22's", for all the members of the Cooper family were drilled in nautical nomenclature, indispensable knowledge for members of both sexes according to Cooper's theory. In March, 1829, he wrote from Marseilles to his daughter Sue that "The Java (U.S. ship-offline) has just got into Toulon,...I have half a mind to go and see the place, and the ship at the same time." ³ Until the Java arrived, Cooper had expressed little interest in Toulon. Later Captain W.M. Woolsey, Cooper's commanding officer in the days on Lake Ontario, was a companion during a winter in Paris, and the pair swapped sea stories like school girls peddling gossip.

All this time Cooper had been busy on a second sea story, The Red Rover, published in 1828. The yarn was a salt water

2. Correspondence, I, 156.

3. Ibid., 161.

romance but the theme of the work carried pungent paragraphs of the big navy argument.

Enjoying the four great requisites of a safe and commodious haven, a placid basin, an outer harbor, and a convenient roadstead, with a clear offing, Newport appeared to the eyes of our European ancestors designed to shelter fleets, and to nurse a race of hardy and expert seamen. Though the latter anticipation has not been entirely disappointed, how little has reality answered to expectation in respect to the former! 4

Government was here being placidly accused of twin failings: failure to develop a fleet, failure to develop Newport, Rhode Island, harbor. It is significant that today Newport is a major naval base, and the site of the Naval War College.

Not only did Cooper keep track of the navy in general, but he followed the careers of his old messmates. In August, 1832, he wrote S.F.B. Morse from Francfort (sic): "I see that my old messmate George Rodgers is dead, and that Downes has been blowing up the Malays, the latter is right, and the former will at least make honest Lawrence Kearney a Captain."⁵ Thus casually could Cooper refer to some of the major developments in the naval establishment. "Messmate George Rodgers" was also the highest ranking officer in the department, and his death touched off a series of advancements that had great effects in the department. For instance, "honest Lawrence Kearney" soon after opened negotiations with China, and is recognized as the

4. Red Rover, p. 1.

5. Correspondence, I, 284.

man who opened the China trade. Downes who had been "blowing up the Malays" was Captain John Downes who landed a force on the west coast of Sumatra in February, 1832, and razed the villages of natives who had plundered a United States merchant vessel the previous year. The act gained peaceful passage for United States' vessels in that area for many years. But most of all, the letter indicates Cooper's familiarity with high ranking naval men and their relative positions within the establishment.

Cooper arrived in New York from Europe in November, 1832, and in December he was in Washington with a friend of long standing, Captain W.B. Shubrick, the officer to whom he had dedicated The Pilot. On the tenth he wrote Mrs. Cooper: "Tomorrow I see the President at eleven." ⁶ But the letter of the following day contains no mention of the interview, probably because that portion of the letter was not published in the Correspondence.

II

Whatever may have been Cooper's political activity between 1833 and 1836, he would have his family believe that he was not seeking office, although apparently a bit of plunder could fall his way should he request it. On July 1, 1836, while the presidential campaign was blowing hot, Cooper wrote his wife:

6. Correspondence, I., 329.

A foolish paragraph is going the rounds that I want to be Secretary of the Navy. I have caused it to be contradicted, though I fear some of the officers are making a little influence to that effect, else it is not easy to see wherever the report should have come. 7

Certainly Cooper's letter seemed to treat the rumor of his office seeking as only a "foolish paragraph", but then the fashion had not set in for literary men to hold the top civilian navy job. It is significant that such a suggestion should be brought forward at a time when Cooper had written literally nothing in criticism of the administration of the navy department. This was to be a favorite theme later.

In 1836-37 Cooper contributed articles to the Naval Magazine, a short lived organ, and by early 1837 he was deep in naval affairs in Washington, affairs that were becoming very complicated indeed. In March in Washington Cooper could dine frequently with Commodore Chauncey, a top commander, and late in the month could write his wife:

Shubrick will command the coast squadron, though Jones is recovered, and is applying for it. The secretary (Mahlon Dickerson) is dissatisfied with Shubrick on account of his obtaining a promise from the President, through the Secretary of War (J.P. Poinsett), but the probability is that the Secretary of War will become Secretary of the Navy.... 8

Apparently some of the powers in the Democratic party thought Cooper deserved some sort of appointment, even though Cooper's own words seem to deny such a desire. On April 12, 1837, Jacob Sutherland wrote to President Van Buren:

7. Correspondence, I, 361.

8. Ibid., 373.

The Democratic tendency of Mr. Cooper's later Publications has drawn upon him the attacks of Various Kinds from the Federal Press. They have attempted to depreciate and undervalue his writings both literary & political and he thinks he has not been Sustained by the Democratic Press and the country, in the manner he had a right to expect. Such a Mark of Public Confidence and Consideration, as would be implied in this appointment, would undoubtedly under existing circumstances be peculiarly Gratifying to him. 9

This year, 1837, and the following year were good seasons for job hunting, especially in the navy Department. The department was riddled with dissension, and cliques within the higher echelons were squabbling for rank and choice commands. A naval exploring expedition, which finally put to sea in September, 1838, under the command of Lt. Charles Wilkes, had for months been fitting out in Norfolk. But inter-service friction had sabotaged all progress. Navy Secretary Dickerson in his annual report to congress on December 2, 1837 reported the expeditionary force had become unwieldy and that costs had greatly exceeded the estimates,¹⁰

Niles National Register for December 30, 1837, carried twin announcements of the resignation of Captain Thomas A. Catesby Jones as commander of the expedition who was "weariied out by continued disappointments..." and a rumor story that "Captain

9. Letter, Jacob Sutherland to President Martin Van Buren, Geneva, New York, April 12, 1837. Van Buren Correspondence, Library of Congress. Quoted in Dorothy Waples, The Whig Myth of James Fenimore Cooper, Yale University Press, 1938, p. 299.
10. Niles National Register, December 23, 1837, pp. 269-271.

W.B. Shubrick has been spoken of as likely to have command of the expedition..." 11

On April 4, 1838, Congress considered a resolution offered by a congressman Wise to convert the exploring squadron into a coast squadron.¹² As stated in the foregoing pages, Cooper had mentioned the coast squadron, and predicted Shubrick would get the command. In May, 1838, Cooper was of the same opinion when he wrote to his wife: "The cabinet is breaking up and Shubrick will get his command I think as soon as changes are made."¹³

Although Shubrick did not get his command, the following month on June 20, Secretary of the Navy Dickerson was replaced by the novelist James K. Paulding.

The friction in both the civilian and military arms of the navy department did not escape the newspapers. Niles National Register on September 8, 1838, carried an editorial reprint from the August 1 Globe concerning Dickerson's resignation:

However, this may be, the general impression is that the discipline and character of the Navy are at a very low ebb. There may be some truth in this, though we are satisfied the truth has been exaggerated. That the service has deteriorated from the exalted elevation it had attained at the close of the late war cannot be denied. But is not this the inevitable and invariable consequence of a long peace?

We are assured, and believe that there is a total want of that esprit de corps, without which there can be nothing high or ennobling in the profession of arms. Instead of the generous avarice of glory, which should inspire every true sailor, it is said that a mean and pitiful jealousy,

11. Ibid., p. 283.

12. Ibid., April 7, 1838, p.96.

13. Correspondence, I, 378.

equally degrading to the man and to the profession, pervades all classes of officers; that instead of cherishing the reputation of every member as a part of their own, and viewing with complacency any favour accorded to merit or services, it is their fault to contemplate it with a scowl of envy, as an unmerited reward earned without desert, and conferred without discrimination. 14

The same issue of Niles National Register carried a Globe editorial for August 2, 1838, which is in a similar vein:

We understand and are assured on the fact from our own observation, that a very degrading and debasing practice has become prominent among some officers of the navy, and for aught we know, the army, too. We allude to the habit of coming to Washington, and tagging at the heels of members of congress, with the pertinacity (sic) of sturdy beggars, animated, or rather depressed, by the consciousness either that their own merits do not entitle them to the favour they ask, or that the man in whom it rests to yield to their claims. 15

While the opinions of the Globe editors must be accepted with the usual discount rate given early American journalists, the tenor of the Globe editorials is unmistakable, and must be taken to mean that at least a segment of the public was being presented propaganda adverse to the interests of the navy.

Cooper's Naval History, published early in the following year, 1839, was to contain its share of this adverse criticism, but his barbs were to be aimed at congress and earlier administrations, and not at his brother officers within the naval establishment. Further, since the beginning of the Van Buren administration, a strong feeling had been growing in congress

14. Ibid., p. 23.

15. Ibid., p. 24.

for the re-introduction of the gunboat system, a system that had failed miserably twenty-five years earlier; in addition, the "war with England" fever was growing stronger. Cooper's first scathing treatment of the navy's civilian administration came in the History:

It has, more or less, been a leading defect of the civil administration of the military affairs of the American government, that too little of professional feeling has presided in its councils, the men who are elevated to political power, in popular governments, seldom entertaining fully into the tone and motives of those who are alive to the sensibilities of military pride. 16

But the Naval History was in a class by itself with its criticism. The History applauded the ships and men of the navy, but lamented the fact that the nation had always practiced a false economy which precluded the building and maintenance of a large fleet. Give the United States an efficient fleet, wrote Cooper, and the growing nation would hold the balance of power in world power politics. And the History was to have political repercussions.

In July, 1839, Cooper wrote from Philadelphia to his wife: "About 2,000 copies of the History have been sold, and new orders are beginning to come in." 17 Navy Secretary J.K. Paulding was one of the first to send congratulations on publication of the book and by October 4 Cooper could write from Philadelphia that "The President is expected here in a day or two, and I shall go and see him." 18 The following day the president had

16. History, I, 215-216.

17. Correspondence, p. 395.

18. Ibid., II, 399.

not yet arrived, but Cooper wrote his wife that "Mr. Van Buren is carrying everything before him, and, out of question, will be re-elected." ¹⁹ Apparently Cooper was still a Jackson-Van Buren democrat. On the eighth he wrote:

I am still detained here, for the History is of too much importance to be neglected. I am essentially improving it, and trying to make it a standard work.

I am invited...to meet the President at dinner...but shall not go. My way is clear for preferment if I wish it, but you know I do not wish it. ²⁰

Later in the year Navy Secretary Paulding chose the History and all the sea stories Cooper had then written, The Pilot, The Red Rover, The Water Witch, and Homeward Bound, to form part of the small library with which he fitted each vessel in the service. These novels were the only pieces of fiction in the libraries. ²¹ The History had found favor not only with critics and the public, but with Democratic administration heads.

It would be difficult to determine precisely the political effects of the History, although some evidence does exist to throw light on the picture. For instance, a major tenet of the History was that the congress should create the rank of admiral in the United States Navy, to put American officers on a level with those of other nations. In the next session of congress, on April 2, 1840, a Senator Nicholas offered a resolution "that the committee on naval affairs be instructed

19. Correspondence, II, 401.

20. Ibid., p. 402.

21. Dorothy Waples, op. cit., p. 254.

to enquire into the expediency of giving a more perfect organization to the navy by creating the rank of admiral, and, limiting, by law, the number of officers in the several existing ranks." ²² But nothing came of the resolution, and Cooper did not live to see an American admiral. David G. Farragut was named the first rear-admiral in 1862 and full admiral in 1866.

Late in 1840 Cooper was again hobnobbing with his crony Shubrick, this time aboard the warship Macedonia in New York harbor, and on the tenth of October wrote his wife:

I have come off today to make a feast on chowder with Shubrick, but must go ashore again tonight. We own a ship of the line, a frigate, and a sloop of war, and make a figure.

Shubrick did not wish to leave the squadron. The offer came from the Department, and probably has a political bearing. The elections are tremendous, and no one knows what will be the result.... Everybody thinks and talks politics. ²³

Whatever may be the meaning of the phrase "we own a ship of the line, etc.", the section is clear where "everybody thinks and talks politics." Cooper's statement about Shubrick suggests that which the Globe editorial had charged earlier, that naval officers were playing politics.

Although the success of General Harrison in the presidential race could be expected to come as a shock to Cooper, he wrote a strange letter on the subject to Shubrick, dated February 28, 1841:

I have made a great political discovery lately, which must not go further than Mrs. Shubrick

22. Niles National Register, April 11, 1840, p. 92.

23. Correspondence, II, 424-425.

and Mary. In 1799, when Congress sat in Philadelphia, my father was a member as was also General Harrison. You know I had a sister killed by a fall from a horse in 1800. This sister passed the winter in Philadelphia with my father. Miss Anne Cooper (the author's daughter) was lately in Philadelphia where she met Mr. Thomas Biddle, who asked if our family were not Harrison men. The reason for so singular a question was asked, and Mr. Biddle answered that in 1799 Mr. Harrison was dying with love for Miss Cooper, that he (Mr. Biddle) was his confidant, and that he thinks but does not know that he was refused. If not refused it was because he was not encouraged to propose, so you see I stand on high grounds and am ready to serve you on occasion. Don't let this go any further, however. I confess to think all the better of the General for this discovery, for it shows that he had forty years ago both taste and judgement in a matter in which men so often fail. 24

This letter could mean that Cooper was angling for a Harrison alliance, or it could have been written in jest, for the brief history of Harrison's love life could not strike many persons as "a great political discovery."

III

Late in 1841 the Edinburgh Review published a review of Cooper's History, comparing it unfavorably with William James' Naval Occurrences. James was an attorney who practiced as a proctor of the English vice-admiralty court, and was interned in the United States during the war of 1812. In 1816 he published a pamphlet entitled "an Inquiry into the Merits of the Principle Naval Actions Between Great Britain and the United States"

24. Mary E. Phillips, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

in which he attempted to prove that in American naval victories over the British, American frigates were larger, stouter, more heavily manned and more heavily armed than their adversaries, and said American accounts were lies which attributed the victories to superior courage and superior seamanship. James published enlarged editions in England in 1817, 1818, and 1819, and in 1822-24 published The Naval History of Great Britain, from the Declaration of War by France in 1793 to the Accession of George IV. This work, also entitled Naval Occurrences, the Edinburgh cited as a pattern for the writing of naval history, and, since Cooper's opinion as regards the merits of the American navy were diametrically opposed to those of James, the Edinburgh found Cooper's History to be slightly less than nothing.

The Democratic Review, a political organ, came to Cooper's defense, publishing a twenty-four page partial refutation of the Edinburgh piece in the issue for May, 1842, and a thirty-five page blast in the issue for June. The Cooper defense carried many paragraphs of anti-British sentiment, as well as threats to the English to beware the American fleet.

As to England, and the peculiar relation in which she now stands to this country, we have a word to say. It is a fact not to be concealed, that the national hostility which has so long prevailed in England towards this country, is now being first transferred to America. The hold which England had on our failings has now got to be slight indeed, and is now confined principally to a few bookworms, devotees of monarchy, and the remains of the old school of doctrinaries in politics. Setting aside the

direct interests of trade, we believe a war with that country might, at any hour, be made extremely popular in this. 25

We sincerely hope that the difficulties which now exist between this country and England may be...amicably disposed of. If war should come, however, we will know what to expect in a naval point of view. We shall by no means be annihilated. 26

The June article concluded with a sentiment foreign to the usual Democratic party line:

We meet in the Edinburgh article but a single remark that is worthy of the ancient reputation of that journal; and that is, where it tells us that America has yet to send forth her fleets, and achieve victories that may influence the politics of the civilized world, before she can properly claim to be a great naval power. To this opinion the writer of this paper fully subscribes, as yet, American has rather given pledges of her naval capabilities, than accomplished anything to take a high place in history.... At this moment, she ought to have a fleet of six or eight line-of-battle ships collected and practising for the purposes of comparison and discipline. 27

For months the Democratic Review had been publishing peace articles, but the two pieces on Cooper amounted to war propaganda. Cooper believed that "the illusion that wars are over is a chimera of speculative moralists". The Democratic articles were unsigned, but the editors wrote that "the authorship of the preceding article is too transparent on its face to escape the observation of any reader." 28 At this late day the authorship

25. "Edinburgh Review on James' Naval Occurrences, and Cooper's Naval History", The Democratic Review, X (June 1842), 538-539.

26. Ibid., X, 540.

27. Ibid., 540-541.

28. Ibid., 541.

is a bit more opaque, but there it seems almost certain that Cooper penned the Review articles.

Also in 1842, Cooper published two more sea tales, The Two Admirals, which again suggested the creation of the rank of Admiral in the American navy, and Wing-and-Wing, a romance with religious overtones.

In 1843 Cooper published Ned Myers, fashioned somewhat in the manner of Dana's Two Years Before the Mast, which had appeared in 1840. But the tone of Ned Myers was different from that of Dana's work; Dana had protested against the practise of flogging, and coarse treatment for sailors, while Ned Myers was, in parts, a pat on the back for Cooper's beloved navy, which, in recent years, had received adverse publicity. Ned, an old ship mate of Cooper's ~~is~~ on the Sterling, had written to Cooper the previous year from Sailor's Snug Harbor, and Cooper invited the old tar to Cooperstown. Together they compiled the story of Ned's life:

I can say conscientiously, that were my life to be passed over again, without the hope of commanding a vessel, it should be passed in the navy. The food is better, the service is lighter, the treatment is better, if a man behave himself at all well he is better cared for, has a port under his lee in case of accidents, and gets good, steady wages, with the certainty of being paid. ...Then he is pretty certain of having gentlemen over him, and that is a great deal for any man. 29

Cooper published Afloat and Ashore and the sequel Miles Wallingford in 1844, when the election was waxing hot, both

29. Ned Myers, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, pp. 181-182.

works replete with political suggestions:

This is an unpleasant subject to me. I could hardly have passed it over, for it proves that the political association of this country failed in one of the greatest ends of all such associations; but nothing is ever gained by suppressing truth, on such a matter. Let those who read reflect on the past; it may possibly have a tendency to render the future more secure, give to the American citizen in reality, some of those rights which it so much accords with our habits to boast of possessing. If concealment did any good, I would gladly besilent; but diseases in the body politic require a bold and manly treatment, even more than those in the physical system. 30

Perhaps this outburst was just another evidence of Cooper's bitterness over the land problem, and, perhaps, this and similar pot shots in the two tales were timed to coincide with the candidacy of Polk, a big navy man.

In any case, this year, 1844, was a big year for Cooper both in person and in publishing. In July the Democratic Review carried Cooper's picture as a frontpiece. In August Cooper made the frontpiece of Graham's Magazine, and inside was a four page biography of Cooper by Rufus W. Griswold. The November issue of Graham's carried the first of Cooper's Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers. In the Lives, of which eleven were published in Graham's and ten published in volume form in 1846, Cooper hammered away at the themes he had set forth in the Naval History--expansion, big fleet, smart fleet, high rank.

30. Miles Wallingford, p. 382.

On January 13, 1845, Cooper received a letter from Commodore Jesse D. Elliot which seems to be an offer of the position of Secretary of Navy.

Every days experience satisfies me of the propriety of having the medal struck of you. Cooper, answers me right to the point, I am urged to take a position at Washington, how would you like to fill the Navy office? 31

Ten years had passed since Cooper wrote his wife about the "foolish paragraph" concerning his hopes of political plum. Yet here, despite Cooper's continued denial of political aspiration was an outright offer of a job from a man who could probably swing the deal, and who must have had some encouragement on Cooper's part in order to make the offer and to request an answer "right to the point."

No doubt the offer was made out of gratitude, and Elliot owed Cooper a great debt. Elliot was second in command to Perry at the Battle of Lake Erie in the War of 1812. Since the war officers in the navy had lined up in Perry and Elliot camps, one claiming Elliot did not properly support Perry in the battle, and Elliot supporters denying the charge. The Elliot group pointed most of all to Perry's own battle dispatches which had highly praised Elliot's battle activity. In the Naval History Cooper reviewed the battle, and, although it is said he did not even know Elliot at the time of writing, Cooper found no fault in Elliot's maneuvering, praising both Perry and Elliot. Later historians, such as Dudley W. Knox, have theorized that Elliot

31. Correspondence, II, 531.

was at fault. Without dipping too deeply into the cess pool of antiquarianism, it can be related that Cooper became involved in several libel suits over the Perry-Elliot controversy, and Elliot himself was acquitted by a courts-martial. Elliot then had a medal struck with Cooper's profile on the reverse, and distributed the medal to prominent people. Then came Elliot's offer.

Whatever may have been Cooper's answer, the historian George Bancroft was named Navy Secretary by President Polk. But Polk himself seems to have owed more to Cooper than to Bancroft for his navy theory. Polk's message to congress on December 2, 1845 reads like a page out of Cooper's History:

Whatever may have been our policy in the earlier stages of the government, when the nation was in its infancy, our shipping and commerce comparatively small, our resources limited, our population sparse, and sparsely extending beyond the limits of the original thirteen states, that policy must be essentially different now that we have grown from three to more than twenty millions of people--that our commerce, carried in our own ships, is found in every sea, and that our territorial boundaries and settlements have been so greatly extended. Neither our commerce, nor our long line of coast on the ocean and the lakes, can be successfully defended against foreign aggression by means of fortifications alone. These are essentials at important commercial and military points, but our chief reliance for this object must be on a well-organized, efficient navy. 32

IV

President Polk's big navy call, in the face of approaching

52. Niles National Register, December 6, 1845, p. 223.

war, strangely enough must have been the death note for Cooper's political relations, for neither the Correspondence nor the later sea tales indicate Cooper was involved with changes in the department or movements in the government. However, Cooper, ever the apologist to the public for the navy, did not fail to continue his applause of the service and to suggest ways and means of using the fleet to back up a foreign policy.

By the time of the publication of Jack Tier, 1848, which had earlier appeared in serial form in Graham's Magazine under the name of Islets of the Gulf, Cooper seems to have cast off relations with all political parties.

Those grounds, (government grounds in Washington) which so long lay a reproach to the national taste and liberality, are now fast becoming beautiful, are already exceedingly pretty, and give to a structure that is destined to become historical, having already associated with it the names of Jefferson, Madison, Jackson, and Quincy Adams, together with the oi polloi of the later Presidents, an entourage that is suitable to its past recollections and its present purposes. 33

Democrats Van Buren and Folk, with Whigs Harrison and Tyler, were here lumped under "oi polloi". This casual casting off of Van Buren's memory harks back to the fall of 1839 when Cooper seemed so willing and anxious to see President Van Buren when he wrote his wife on October 4, but on October 8 wrote that he was invited to "meet the President at dinner...but shall not go." There is just enough here to suggest that Cooper was

33. Jack Tier, p. 478.

disappointed in Van Buren, yet not enough to prove the statement.

Although Cooper's political associations had come to an end, he was still a staunch booster in his fiction for the navy, and the plugging usually took the form of criticism of Congress. In the years between 1840 and 1850 the navy department was undergoing changes. In 1842 the department had been reorganized, breaking the administrative end down into five bureaus. The service had also come in for criticism as regards treatment of enlisted men, and some question had been raised as to the quality of the officer corps. Congress had ordered several investigations, but had accomplished little. Cooper resented all congressional tampering with the navy:

That ship, then, is called the Foughkeepsie, is she, sir? inquired Spike.

Such is her name, thanks to a most beneficent and sage provision of Congress, which has extended its parental care over the navy so far as to imagine that a man chosen by the people to exercise so many of the functions of a sovereign, is not fit to name a ship. All our two and three deckers are to be called after states; the frigates after rivers; and the sloops after towns. Thus it is that our craft has the honor to be called the United States ship, the Foughkeepsie instead of the Arrow, or the Wasp, or the Curlew, or the Petrel, as might otherwise have been the case. But the wisdom of Congress is manifest, for the plan teaches us sailors geography. 34

This is a bit of cavilling, but, much as Cooper could decry that sport, he was very adept at it. This attitude toward Congress was much the same as that of Cooper's friend Shubrick. Still much of Cooper's partiality to the navy was legitimate, and

both in fact and fiction he tried to show the use and value of a navy, a use and value that navy men are still trying to impress on laymen in Congress and at home.

At all events, it is some answer to those who ask "What is the navy about?" that months of war have gone by, and not an American has been captured. Take away that navy, and the insurance offices in Wall Street would tumble like a New York party-wall in a fire. 35

Cooper, formerly on the inside track on some of the military-political maneuvers in Washington, could not resist a blast at such actions:

He ascribed the victory to the great superiority of the American officers of inferior rank; it being well known that in the service of the 'Republic of the North', as he termed America, men who had been regularly educated at the military academy, and who had reached the period of middle life, wereserving in the stations of captains, and sometimes in that of lieutenants; men who, in many cases, were fitted to command regiments and brigades, having been kept in these lower stations by the tardiness with which promotion comes in an army like that of this country.

Don Juan Montefalderon was not sufficiently conversant with the subject, perhaps, else he might have added, that when occasions do offer to bestow on these gentlemen the preferment they have so hardly and patiently earned, they are too often neglected, in order to extend the circle of vulgar political patronage. He did not know that when a new regiment of dragoons was raised, one permanent in its character, and intended to be identified with the army in all future time, that, instead of giving its commissions to those who had fairly earned them by long privations and faithful service, they were given, with one or two exceptions, to strangers.

No government trifles more with its army and navy than our own. So niggardly are the master-spirits at Washington of the honors justly earned by military men, that we still have fleets commanded by captains, and armies by officers whose regular duty it would be to command brigades. 36

35. Jack Tier, p. 107.

36. Ibid., p. 363.

In the years between Two Years Before the Mast in 1840 and White Jacket in 1850, both works which deplored the conditions of common seamen in the navy and merchant service, many reform groups were demanding changes in the naval codes. But Cooper would not hear of civilian dictation to military men. Still, he would admit that earlier in the history of the navy, rank had worked abuses:

It may be well to remark here, that the Rev. Mr. Hollins was not one of the 'Launch'd chaplains,' that used to do discredit to the navy of this country, or a layman dubbed with such a title, and rated that he might get the pay and become a boon companion of the captain, at the table and in his frolics ashore. Those days are gone by, and ministers of the gospel are now really employed to care for the souls of the poor sailors.... 37

Cooper had a similar speech to make on the improved caliber of naval surgeons, contending that in the early days of the navy men would joke about having the ship's carpenter perform an amputation, since he could likely do a better job than the doctor, but that at the time of writing, "all this is vastly changed for the better, and a navy-surgeon is necessarily a man of education and experience...." Yet, in 1850 Melville could write in White Jacket the famous, not to say notorious, passage on the surgeon of the fleet who amputated a man's leg, in the face of solid opposition of all the other ship's surgeons, because he was a sadist, and wanted to demonstrate his surgical technique to the younger doctors.

37. Jack Tier, pp. 377-378.

Reform groups at this time were complaining of methods of discipline, especially on the question of flogging. As early as 1832 Navy Secretary Levi Woodbury had unsuccessfully recommended the abolition of flogging. Dana had nearly wept over "A man--a human being, made in God's likeness--fastened up and flogged like a beast." ³⁸ In the preface written August 10, 1849, for a later edition of The Pilot, Cooper had his say on the issue of flogging:

It is the judgement in administration, and not the mode of punishment, that requires looking into; and, in this respect, there has certainly, been a great improvement of late years. It is seluom, indeed, that any institution, practice, or system, is improved by the blind interference of those who know nothing about it. Better would it be to trust to the experience of those who have long governed turbulent men, than to those impulsive experiments who rarely regard more than one side of a question, and that the most showy and glittering: having quite half the time some selfish personal end to answer. ³⁹

The navy had become notorious for its flogging, if the accounts of some writers are to be believed. "The chivalric Virginian, John Randolph of Roanoke, declared in his place in Congress, that on board of the American man-of-war that carried him out Ambassador to Russia he had witnessed more flogging than had taken place on his own plantation of five hundred African slaves in ten years."⁴⁰ The discount system must be applied doubly here, once for southern rhetoric and again for Melville's propagandizing, but the statement is at least an indication of conditions on a particular ship of the

38. Richard H. Dana, Two Years Before the Mast, Everyman's Library Edition, p. 84.

39. Ibid., iv.

40. Herman Melville, White Jacket, Constable and Company Ltd., London, 1922, p. 176.

navy.

Early in his administration Navy Secretary Bancroft had put an end to the practice of officers of the watch inflicting chastisement on seamen, that function under the naval codes being delegated to the captain but apparently some watch officers were still using the colt, the rope end used as a whip:

It is believed that, even at the present day, there are instances of commanders still violating the law, by delegating the power of the colt to subordinates. At all events, it is certain that, almost to a man, the lieutenants in the navy bitterly rail against the officiousness of Bancroft, in so materially abridging their usurped functions by snatching the colt from their hands. At the time, they predicted that this rash and most ill judged interference of the Secretary would end in the breaking up of all discipline in the Navy. But it has not so proved. These officers now predict that, if the 'Cat' (of nine tails) be abolished, the same unfulfilled prediction would be verified. 41

Late in 1850 the Congress voted to abolish flogging as a punishment, and Cooper's friend Shubrick was one of five high ranking officers appointed to draft a new navy code. The abolition of flogging was no more popular in the naval establishment than it was with Cooper. On March 17, 1851 Shubrick wrote to Cooper:

Stewart, Morris, Berry, Breese and myself are still at work on the revision of the Laws, Rules, and Regulations, etc., etc., for the Government of the Navy. I think we shall be able to mend matters a little if Congress can be prevailed upon to carry out what we recommend, but it is difficult to get that enlightened and patriotic body to attend to any thing but the dirty logrolling necessary to carry on the business of President making. 42

41. Herman Melville, White Jacket, p. 175.

42. Correspondence, II, 704.

On May 2, 1851, Shubrick had more discouraging navy news for Cooper:

Well, we are to have Stockton in the Senate--he is on the Naval committee, and I am told talks large about what he intends to do. He is full of wild schemes, such as doing away with necessary ships and recruiting officers. His plan is, that when a captain is appointed to a ship he shall recruit his own crew, and they shall not be transferable..... 43

This sort of thing must have been bitter news indeed to the dying Cooper. He had written dozens of expositions on the need for a navy, and yet, here was a member of a congressional military committee who had not the slightest notion of the operation of the military arm. Cooper had been discouraged earlier and amazed that legislators failed to appreciate sea power after the experience of three naval wars; could he have seen the naval debacle after the Civil War as well as subsequent American wars, he probably would not have taken the trouble to write the history.

CHAPTER III

Sailor and Novelist

When Cooper published The Pilot in 1823 he set the pattern for a new school of fiction, a school that still reaps rewards in the manuscript market. Later writers of sea stories learned something that didn't occur to Cooper, that the interest in a sea story lay not in the sea itself, but in the men and the little wooden world in which they crossed the seas. Only once did Cooper approach a plot in a sea story, in the much neglected Sea Lions.

Cooper's daughter, Susan, summed up her father's character in a few words. "In general, his thoughts seem to have turned upon ships, and the sea, and farming, and landscape gardening."¹ This attitude is evident in Cooper's work, for even in his frontier romances the sea would find an allusion in such spots as the title of The Pathfinder, or the Inland Sea, or in the case of Floating Tom Sutter's Castle in The Deerslayer.

In later years Cooper realized that he had set a new fashion in fiction, but never realized how it had happened. It seems that he thought the use of technical sailing terms had turned the trick, and apparently did not know that John Dryden had debated that question more than one hundred-fifty years earlier in the preface to Annus Mirabilis.

1. Correspondence, I, 35.

In the preface to The Pilot Cooper wrote that he had engaged in a conversation regarding Sir Walter Scott's The Pirate, and opined that the story obviously was written by a land lubber.

Cooper observed further that there was room for dispute as to the "seamanship displayed in The Pirate, a quality to which the book has certainly very little just pretension. The result of this conversation was a sudden determination to produce a work, which, if it had no other merit, might present truer pictures of the ocean and ships than any that are to be found in The Pirate."²

Whether or no this was the true inspiration for The Pilot is a matter of conjecture, but the fact remains that the book was financially successful, and the path was opened for the sea story. In reviewing The Pilot, the Edinburgh Review wrote that "the empire of the sea is conceded to him by acclamation." In the preface to the 1850 edition of The Pilot Cooper wrote:

It would be affectation to deny that The Pilot met with a most unlooked-for success. The novelty of the design probably contributed a large share of the result. Sea-tales came into vogue, as a consequence; and, as every practical part of knowledge has its uses, something has been gained by letting the landman into the seaman's manner of life.³

There seems to be little question that Cooper fathered the American sea story. Dana, in the preface to Two Years Before the Mast in 1840 wrote that "Since Mr. Cooper's Pilot and Red Rover, there have been so many stories of sea life written...."

2. Ibid., 111.

3. Ibid., iv.

--tacit knowledgement of Cooper's lead. And a glance through contemporary magazines will confirm the notion that sea stories were popular, many of the stories having titles only slightly different from Cooper's, such as The Black Rover, The Reefer, The Privateer, Derams of the Land and Sea.

The Pilot is the story of two American naval vessels and crews, loitering off the coast of England during the Revolutionary War. John Paul Jones, though never named, is the pilot, and his mission is, apparently, to direct the ship crews in the capture of hostages to be used in a later exchange of prisoners.

The American lieutenants Griffith and Barnstable engage in byplay with two young colonial ladies whose Tory uncle had taken them to England at the outbreak of war. In the end the officers marry the girls, but the pilot does not line up the hostages.

While the plot is not important, the choice and treatment of the subject do enter into a consideration of Cooper's naval thought. The tone of The Pilot is most favorable to Jones and most deprecating toward the French whom Cooper believed had thwarted Jones' efforts in the Revolution. Cooper has Jones say:

But I was born without the nobility of
twenty generations to corrupt my blood and
deaden my soul, and am not trusted by the
degenerate wretches who rule the French marine. 4

4. The Pilot, pp. 216-217.

In later years, when writing the History and the Lives, Cooper was forced to compare Jones with Edward Preble, and Cooper saw fit to make Jones come off second best, for the project of An American fleet was dear to Cooper's heart, and Jones had engaged in single combat while Preble had marshalled the first American fleet against an enemy. This is typical of Cooper's naval maturation, from the incident to the general picture. The story of The Pilot further shows the two American vessels in combat with English craft, with the Americans coming out on top in courage, gunnery, and seamanship, a combined theme that was to come in for a good deal of discussion later.

As to the reception of The Pilot, the review of the North American can be accepted as indicative if not typical:

The choice of incidents and actors, and the frequent allusions to our history, manners and habits, make the story strike deep into the feelings of American readers; and by implicating the tale with our naval history, the author possesses himself of one of the few positions from which our national enthusiasm, is accessible.

But in the subject of our naval skill and prowess, although we are not willing to confess it, we are, yet, real enthusiasts. This is a string to which the national feeling vibrates certainly and deeply; and this string the author has touched with effect. 5

Apparently the North American reviewer was given to enthusiasm, for by present day standards The Pilot does not

5. North American, April 1824, pp. 314-329, quoted in Marcel Clavel, Fenimore Cooper and His Critics, 1938, p. 193.

merit such praise; and yet the tale was new and different. It did, however, have more action on land than on board ship. Standard criticism makes much of the naval battle and the storm in the story, particularly the storm; this is all very well, but the true significance of The Pilot lies in the theme, the prowess of the American navy, and in the fact that Cooper had originated a new literary tradition.

Five years later, in 1828, the second sea story was published, The Red Rover. This was strictly a romance, with naval commentaries on the side; still, present day pulpsters make use of the devices Cooper employed in The Red Rover. For instance, an American, Harry Wilder, a lieutenant in the English navy in the days before the Revolution, masquerades as a civilian and sings on as first mate with the piratical Red Rover. This device is still in good favor in popular detective fiction when the undercover man joins the bandit gang and secretly sends information to headquarters. Another example is the Rover himself, a man of intellect, although sensual, a man superior to his environment and companions. This stereotype of the wonderful rogue was exploited to the full in recent years by Rafael Sabatini in such pieces as the widely read Captain Blood.

After Wilder joins the Rover's band in Newport Harbor, the Rover, through personal contact, obtains command of a merchant vessel for first mate Wilder, planning to plunder the vessel at sea. Wilder has a young woman, Gertrude, and her

governess Mrs. Wyllys aboard, bound for Charleston. Wilder's vessel goes down, though he and the ladies escape together in a boat, and are picked up by the Rover. When contact is made with a vessel of the English fleet, Wilder is discovered to be a spy, but generously released. The Rover then captures the English vessel, and, while his crew is preparing to execute Wilder, by one of Cooper's providential reunions, finds that Mrs. Wyllys is Wilder's mother. The Rover then stops the execution, disperses his crew, and blows up his ship, after setting Wilder and the ladies adrift. Wilder, whose name is found to be Henry De Lacey, marries Gertrude, and becomes Captain De Lacey of the United States Navy. In the final chapter, when the De Lacey's have been married many years and the war of the Revolution is in full swing, a dying man is one day carried into their home, and is found to be the Red Rover, fatally wounded while fighting at sea for the colonists. Henry's mother then announces the Rover is her brother. This combination of circumstances gives the rogue an honorable death and all are happy.

There was nothing particularly new about The Red Rover, except that the action was carried on more at sea than in The Pilot. One minor development of mechanics was the sea story formula of storm, ship wreck and rescue that, with variations, Cooper was to work into all the sea tales. The Pilot had only the storm. The chase, always a part of a Cooper tale, was inevitable in a sea story, and any Cooper

sea story, without title or by-line, could eventually be identified by virtue of the fact that at the beginning of a chase a brine freckled wag would advise the ship's commander that "A starn chase is a long chase, Cap'n." This line appears invariably.

The Water Witch, written in Italy and published in 1831, was one of the strangest of Cooper's tales, although he suggested in the preface to the 1850 edition that "this is probably the most imaginative book ever written by the author. Its fault is in blending too much of the real with the purely ideal."⁶ No one will deny that the work is one of imagination, not to say fantasy.

The tale concerns a New York Dutch merchant, Alderman Van Beverout, whose goods are smuggled to him by the notorious Skimmer of the seas. Captain Ludlow of HMS Coquette, enamored of the Alderman's niece, Alida Barberie, would like to catch the pirate Skimmer. The Water-Witch is the Skimmer's ship, and supposedly protected by the Sea-Green Lady, a type of water sprite who mysteriously appears in the cabin when summoned by weird music. The real character of this creature is never satisfactorily resolved, and this may be Cooper's meaning of "blending too much of the real with the purely ideal."

The Water-Witch is significant primarily in that it is Cooper's first example of a stolen character, or at least part of a character, and the prorer part at that. The one

6. The Water Witch, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, iii.

really interesting personality in the Witch is the Alderman Van Berverout, a true prophet of profit, who relates all knowledge and activity to the field of merchandising. The Alderman is patterned after good Bob Acres, at least as far as cursing, of Sheridan's comedy The Rivals. As Acres would shout an oath relating to the subject under consideration, so the merchant would scream "Bonds and balances!" "Legacies and foreign Tongues!" and a hundred others. A character patterned on Mrs. Malaprop of The Rivals later appeared in Jack Tier.

II

Whatever may have been the faults of the Witch, Cooper's other projects were paying great dividends at this time. Writing from Paris to his sister-in-law Caroline De Lancey, December 3, 1831, he said:

I am making money so fast, just now, and it is so important to me to be on the spot, that I should be culpable to the last degree, to let the opportunity of providing for the girls go by. 7

Cooper had then suggested that Caroline join the family in Europe, and that she could serve as his copyist, mentioning that he had "the prospect of receiving this year near or quite twenty thousand dollars."⁸

But with the increasing social criticism, Cooper's returns from writing were to diminish, and there was even

7. Correspondence, I, 248.

8. Ibid., 249.

some question later as to whether Carey, his publisher, would accept his work. On May 25, 1838, Cooper wrote his wife that he did not "expect that he (Carey) will publish either Home-as-Found or the Naval History,"⁹ Carey had accepted Homeward Bound for publication in 1838, the fourth of Cooper's tales with the action placed on the sea.

Homeward Bound, however, was not properly a sea tale, or fiction of any kind, for that matter. The work was some sort of bastard breed, too long for an essay, too obvious for satire. Here Cooper poured out the accumulated bitterness of his hatred of what he termed American mediocrity, little realizing that his own loudly critical tirades were as much a symptom of that mediocrity as were the patriotic puffs of Editor Stedfast Dodge, the target of most of Cooper's splenetic darts. Homeward Bound is not in the tradition of Cooper's sea tales, and must be by-passed as a mere literary tantrum, an evidence that Cooper did not know what to print and what to throw away.

The next of the sea stories, Mercedes of Castile, appeared in 1840, and stands as a monument to the bad judgement of a mature novelist. Mercedes is a story of Columbus's voyage to America, but is related to the efforts of Queen Isabella's favorite, Mercedes, in behalf of Columbus, to secure for him ships and provisions to make the American journey. Mercedes's interest is the hope that riches from the

9. Correspondence, I, 249.

new world will finance a new crusade. The entire voyage of Columbus is narrated for more than two-thirds of the pages, when the action is transferred to a marriage mixup between Mercedes, Luis, her intended, and Ozema, an Indian girl brought to Spain on the return trip. After working for dramatic effect on the voyage west, tinkering with the domestic affairs of three rather unimportant people smacks of anti-climax. Mercedes is described adequately, in the Literary History of the United States as a "masterpiece of tediousness."

Mercedes does, however, illustrate one nasty propensity into which Cooper had dropped at this time--the tabloid newspaper trick of making fiction in fact, or emphasizing the trivial.

The lustre that was thrown around the voyage of Columbus brought the seas into favor. It was no longer deemed an inferior occupation, or unsuited to nobles to engage in enterprises on its bosom; and that very propensity of our hero, which had so often been mentioned to his prejudice in former years, was now frequently named to his credit. Though his real connection with Columbus is published, for the first time, in these pages, the circumstances having escaped the superficial investigation of historians, it was an advantage to him to be known as having manifested what might be termed a maritime disposition, in an age when most of his rank and expectations were satisfied with the adventures of the land.¹⁰

In the Naval History, published in 1839, Cooper had pointed out that the officer morale suffered in the American navy because officers could not advance past the rank of Captain,

10. Mercedes of Castile, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896, p. 500.

highest existing rank in the navy, but far below that of other nations. The senate in 1840 had considered a resolution advocating the creation of the rank of admiral, but the resolution was table bait. Piping on the high rank tune, Cooper in 1842 published The Two Admirals, a hodge podge of dramatic motives and propagandizing. The story early connects a young American (in the days before the Revolution) an officer in the English navy, with the daughter of a lighthouse keeper. The two English admirals are Sir Jervis Oakes, a Tory in politics, and his second in command, Admiral Bluewater, a Jacobite Whig. When the admirals are described, the reader is firmly admonished with the knowledge that "it is a symptom of the diffusive tendency of everything in this country that America has never yet assembled a fleet." The story then continues. After a series of adventures, a kindly providence finds the young American to be the true heir to a vast English estate, and the lighthouse keeper's daughter to be something of a foundling who is truly Admiral Bluewater's niece. The boy and girl marry, Bluewater is killed in action and buried in Westminster Abbey. Years later the happy pair and their children meet Oakes, who has become senile, at the tomb of Bluewater. It may be that Cooper considered this the true ends of Whig and Tory. The plot is not stimulating, but it did provide Cooper an instrument to play his "big fleet-high rank" tune. ¹¹

11. The Two Admirals, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1896.

Wing-and-Wing, 1842, again involved a laughing, dashing pirate, but this time the conflict between the pirate, Raoul Yvard, and the girl he loved, Ghita, involved a religious question, for Raoul was an atheist, and Ghita would not marry an unbeliever. The religious element in Cooper's sea stories takes a greater number of pages in each succeeding story from The Pilot through The Sea Lions. The pagan Raoul is killed by the English after a protracted chase, and a villainous fight, in addition to other adventures. While the story is not attractive to present day readers, Cooper wrote in the preface that he felt a "strong paternal feeling in behalf of this book, placing it very high in the estimate of its merits, as compared with other books from the same pen."¹² And it is true that a few passages in Wing-and-Wing are top-notch, such as that describing the temperament of the sailor, a description that any sailor would admit to be both true and telling:

Of all men, the sailors get to be the most blase in the way of the sensations produced by novelties, and fine scenery. It appears to be a part of their calling to suppress the emotions of a greenhorn; and, generally, they look upon anything that is a little out of the ordinary track, with the coolness of those who feel it is an admission of inferiority to betray surprise. It seldom happens with them, that anything occurs, or anything is seen, to which the last cruise, or, if the vessel be engaged in trade, the last voyage, did not at least furnish a parallel; usually the past event, or the more distant object, has the advantage.

Strand, the boastswain, was one of those who, on all such occasions, "died hard". He

12. Ibid., 11.

was the last man in the ship who ever gave up a prejudice; and this for three several reasons: he was a cockney, and believed himself born in the centre of human knowledge; he was a seaman, and understood the world; he was a boatswain, and stood upon his dignity. 13

III

With Ned Myers (1843) Cooper entered a new field of writing, a type of writing which would appear today under the title of The Life of Ned Myers, as told to J.F. Cooper. Myers had been a cabin boy on the *Sterling*, the merchantman in which Cooper had gone to sea. In 1841, Ned, now a decrepit old seaman living at the Sailor's Snug Harbor, a sort of pensioners home near New York, wrote asking whether Cooper was the young man from the *Sterling*. In due time, Cooper got in contact with Myers and carried the old tar to Cooperstown for a lengthy visit. After the publication of Ned Myers, Cooper divided the receipts with his old shipmate.

Ned Myers was also something of a democratic venture for Cooper; this was the life story of a common man. Two Years Before the Mast, published in 1840, may have suggested the possibility of such a tale to Cooper, although he would attribute the suggestion to another source:

It is an old remark, that the life of any man, could the incidents be faithfully told, would possess interest and instruction for the general reader. The conviction of the perfect truth of this saying has induced the writer to commit to paper the vicissitudes, escapes, and opinions of one of his old shipmates as a

sure means of giving the public some just notions of the career of a common sailor. 14

The narrative of Ned Myers is written in the first person and purports to be written as nearly as possible in Ned's own words; such seems to be the case. The tale follows Ned's adventures from his cabin boy days, through his naval service in the war of 1812, smuggling tobacco in Ireland and opium in China, drunkenness and theft, filth and misery until Ned gets religion from reading the Bible and Pilgrim's Progress while convalescing from a fever in Batavia.

Much of Ned Myers is of a tone similar to the old song, usually accompanied by a tambourine, "cigarettes and whiskey, and wild, wild women...."

My great wish is that this picture of a sailor's risks and hardships may have some effect in causing this large and useful class of men to think on the subject of their habits, I entertain no doubts that the money I have disposed of far worse than if I had thrown it into the sea, which went to reduce me to that mental hell, the "horrors", and which on one occasion at least, drove me to the verge of suicide, would have formed a large sum, had it been properly laid by....

On the subject of liquor I can say nothing that has not often been said by others.... It was fast converting me into a being inferior to a man, and but for God's mercy might have rendered me the perpetrator of crimes that it would shock me to think of in my sober sane moments.

The past I have related as faithfully as I have been able so to do. The future is with God--to whom belongeth the power and glory for ever and ever! 15

14. Ned Myers, G.P. Putnam's Son, New York, 1896, 1.

15. Ibid., p. 242.

Despite Cooper's theory that the life of any man would prove interesting "could the events be faithfully told," Ned Myers stands somewhere in the middle category of the sea tales, and its main distinction is its extreme brevity, being only one-half as long as the remainder of the story. This may be an argument against the true-story formula. One interesting bit is the religiosity of Ned Myers, stronger than any of the preceding stories.

Afloat and Ashore (1844) and the sequel Miles Wallingford (1844) concern the life history of a young man called Miles Wallingford. The yarns are written in the first person style adopted in Ned Myers, and the narrator is described as being sixty years old, ten years older than Cooper at the time of writing. In the choice of the hero's name Cooper may have paid tribute to John Paul Jones' first mate, Lieutenant Wallingford, who was killed in action. Afloat and Ashore is significant among Cooper's work if for no other reason than that it swings right into the story without the usual one-hundred pages of stage setting. Miles, his mother and father dead, runs away to sea at 16, makes a voyage to China, another to London, a third around the Horn to the northwest and through the south seas, the whole interspersed with fights with French and English, captures, escapes, and the remainder of the Cooper catalogue. The first person method is too much for Cooper, and, aside from the naval commentaries already men-

tioned, the story has comments and suggestions on English newspapers, proper keeping of the Sabbath, the Episcopal church and bishops, dramatic theory, lack of decent inns in America, medical theory on the causes of various pulmonary diseases, beauty of American women, the unreasonable theory that all men are equal, methods of life saving, and even the superfluity of door knockers.

After a series of profitable ventures and adventures Miles, at twenty-one, becomes a ship owner and captain. In Miles Wallingford, Cooper resorts to his old habits. Miles' sister dies and the stage is set (this, including the funeral, takes 113 pages). Miles mortgages his country estates to procure money to buy a cargo intended for France. Then follows a long series of chases, captures, escapes, and the grand although rather obvious conclusion that "there is something fascinating about a race."¹⁶ Next come storm, shipwreck, and imprisonment, followed by escape and a return home. The mortgage has been foreclosed, but, like a good sea lawyer, Cooper outs that knot, and marries his Lucy, very likely drawn from Mrs. Cooper.

Despite the petulance of some portions of Afloat and Ashore, the yarn is certainly one of Cooper's best salt water tales. In the preface Cooper had promised the reader the work would contain no asides;

The writer has published so much truth
which the world has insisted was fiction, and
so much fiction which has been received as truth,

that, in the present instance, he has resolved to say nothing on the subject. 17

And for the first one-fourth of the tale Cooper did say nothing on the subject, sticking strictly to story-telling; then he began lapsing into the old habit of tweaking the reader by the ear with a comment on politics or a boast of the prowess of the navy. He could also put in a boost for the sale of his own books. When the novelist James K. Paulding was secretary of the navy in 1839, he began outfitting each naval vessel with a small library. Among the works selected were Cooper's History, and the four sea stories that had then been published. These were the only pieces of fiction selected. In Afloat and Ashore Cooper, who concentrated on naval policy and theory and left others to think about welfare, touched on sea going welfare.

The leisure of a sea life, in a tranquil, well-ordered vessel, admits of much study; and books ought to be a leading object in the fitting out that portion of a vessel's equipment which relate chiefly to the welfare of her officers and crew. 18

Cooper might well broadcast this suggestion, for, with high ranking friends in the naval establishment, he could be certain that if more works of fiction were added to ship's libraries, the tales of Cooper would be high on the list of books recommended for purchase.

17. Ibid., 1.

18. Ibid., p: 293.

IV

The Crater, which is at least superficially a sea story, contains Cooper's clearly expressed theories on God and Government. The narrative relates the adventures of Mark Woolston, son of a Pennsylvania doctor, on a salt water reef in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. After Mark, and his friend Bob Betts, are cast up on the reef, they decide to make a long range plan for survival, planting seeds from the ship's stores, and subsisting on the ship's food. The ship itself is landlocked inside a lagoon, and cannot be floated, and the other members of the crew have deserted in a small boat when the situation became critical earlier. Through hard work and good fortune, Mark establishes contact with the outside world, and founds a colony on the reef and adjacent islands that appear through volcanic eruption. The colony commences a thriving whaling trade, and for the second time Cooper relates the romance of whaling, the first time having been Long Tom Coffin's venture in The Pilot. Working the allegory for all its religious and political significance, Cooper introduced into the colony some members of the bar, a cavilling editor, and sectarian clergymen, who, naturally, according to Cooper's beliefs, would create dissention. Then follows a tirade against majority rule, with a cry, related to that of Calhoun, that the Constitution was intended to protect minority rights; and a blast at nominating conventions

and caucuses, instituted under Jackson. Mark goes to Philadelphia, and, on his return to the colony, the islands have subsided into the sea.

That The Crater is a work of bitterness cannot be denied for too many passages attest to the fact:

How this was to happen, the worthy doctor certainly did not know. This was because he lived in 1796, instead of 1847. Nowadays, nothing is easier than to separate a man from his wife, unless it be to obtain civic honors for a murderer. 19

And yet, along with the bitterness, The Crater also shows Cooper's belief in the religious and political progress of humanity, incorporating a belief in American destiny.

Among the many things that have been revealed to us, where so many are hid, we are told that our information is to increase, as we draw nearer to the millennium, until "The whole earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." We may be far from the blessed day; probably are; but he has lived in vain, who has dwelt his half century in the midst of the civilization of this our own age, and does not see around him the thousand proofs of the tendency of things to the fulfillment of the decrees, announced to us ages ago by the pens of holy men. Rome, Greece, Egypt, and all that we know of the past, which comes purely of man and his passions, empires, dynasties, heresies, and novelties, come and go like the changes of the seasons; while the only thing that can be termed stable is the slow but sure progress of prophecy. The agencies that have been employed to bring about the great ends foretold so many centuries since, are so very natural, that we often lose sight of the mighty truth in its seeming simplicity. 20

Many of Cooper's pronouncements are contradictory in themselves, and can only be interpreted when made to fit the general

19. Ibid., p. 23.

20. Ibid., p. 143.

pattern of his thought. Here he has stated that the "only thing that can be termed stable is the slow but sure progress of prophecy", more or less ruling out the material. Yet the evidence for this belief is that "he has lived in vain, who has dwelt his half century in the midst of the civilization of this our own age, and does not see around him the thousands of proofs of the tendency of things to the fulfillment of the decrees...." patent recognition of progress and destiny.

In 1848 Cooper published Jack Tier, a tale that had appeared in Graham's Magazine in 1846 under the title of Islets of the Gulf. The story involves the villainous Captain Stephen Spike, owner of the brig Molly Swash, a smuggler of gun powder to the Mexicans during the war. Harry Mulford, a typical Cooper salt water hero "standing over six feet in his stockings"--this is standard--is Spike's first mate, but no friend. Rose Budd, and her aunt, Mrs. Budd, agree to sail with Spike, that rogue having approached each of the ladies separately, convincing each that the other needs a sea voyage for reasons of health. His purpose is that he wishes to marry Rose. A fair bit of humor creeps in the tale in the character of Mrs. Budd who is confused by such nautical terms as "land fall", "shooting the sun",--this brings on a complete course in the theory and practice of navigation--"on soundings", and others. She is patterned on Mrs. Malaprop of The Rivals, as Bob Acres of The Rivals showed in Alderman Van Berverpūt in The Water Witch. Another similarity with the Witch is in the

character of Jack Tier, a weather beaten old salt who is the ship's steward, taken aboard just as the voyage begins. After a series of chases by naval patrols, squabbles between Spike and Mulford, who also wants to marry Rose, captures, escapes, and recaptures, Spike is fatally wounded in a chase by a naval patrol. In the hospital, where Spike is dying Jack Tier is revealed to be a woman, in fact the deserted wife of Spike, who has been trying to catch his ship these twenty years. This device was also used in the Water Witch when Master Seadrift, the Rover's aide, is found to be a woman, and the daughter of Alderman Van Bererout at that. As for Tier, or Mrs. Spike, she ends her days with Harry and Mrs. Mulford, nee Rose Budd.

As has been explained in preceding chapters, Jack Tier is distinguished by what it reveals of Cooper's expansionist thought. But it has also another peculiar fact--some hideous death scenes. For instance, in the final chase in the tale, a cutter from a naval patrol is chasing Spike and the people from the Swash, in a small boat. When the cutter gains, Spike begins pushing people overboard to lighten his craft. When it comes Mrs. Budd's turn, she jumps overside, but grasps the gunwale and the boatswain's hand. Spike orders her cut loose.

The struggledid not last long. The boastwain drew his knife across the wrists of the hand that grasped his own, one shriek was heard, and the boat plunged into the trough of the sea, leaving the form of poor Mrs. Budd struggling with the wave of its summit, and amid the foam of its crest. This was the last that was ever seen of the unfortunate relict. 21

Jack Tier is also marked for an inordinate number of deaths, but Cooper's device on killing off characters may have seemed to him the most natural thing in the world, for in his own family his five brothers had all died between 1813 and 1819.

V

The Sea Lions, last, most neglected of the sea stories, and yet one of the most interesting, was published in 1849. Standard criticism of The Sea Lions tosses it off with the comment that it is Cooper's treatment of the doctrine of Trinitarianism. This is true, but it is a rare occurrence to discount a book for the reason that it deals with the philosophy of Christianity.

The Sea Lions is, ostensibly, the story of a sealing voyage and a hunt for buried treasure, but, as is always stated, and truthfully, large sections of it could be lifted for re-printing in a missionary manual. Deacon Israel Pratt, richest and closest man in Sag Harbor, is the instigator of the action. As the tale opens the Deacon has got hold of Tom Daggett, a dying old sailor, landed at the Harbor by a passing ship, who claims to know the locations of a pirate treasure and uncharted islands virtually carpeted with seals. All this Tom reveals, but not the positions, contracting with the Deacon to lead out an expedition on shares, if the Deacon will finance the trip. But Tom dies, leaving the Deacon with a scent of great wealth. That worthy, hoping to follow the scent to the source,

leafs through Tom's sea chest, and, finding the treasure and seal islands positions recorded there in pencil, copies the locations and erases the marks from the map. The deacon is then ready to send out a ship, under the command of Roswell Gardiner, to retrieve the gold and furs. A conflict similar to that in Wing-and-Wing is introduced between Roswell, a deist, and the Deacon's niece, Mary, an orthodox Christian. After Tom dies, a Captain Daggett, Tom's nephew from Martha's Vineyard across the ^aby, shows up to claim Tom's body. The Daggett's have heard of Tom's seal and gold islands, though he has not been home in fifty years. On finding nothing indicated on the dead man's charts, the Daggetts watch the Deacon's preparations, and decide he has pilfered the information. The Deacon buys a ship, and the Vineyard men follow his lead; both craft are named Sea Lion.

The ship's fall in at sea, Captain Daggett obviously planning to follow Gardiner. Through shrewd maneuvering Gardiner loses Daggett at Cape Horn, and pushes through the ice fields to the south to find the fabulous seal islands. The islands prove all Tom Daggett had said, and Gardiner's men begin filling the ship with furs and oil. When the operation is nearly completed, Daggett's ship turns up at the island, and Gardiner and his men agree to help the Vineyard men take on a cargo. However, some of the Vineyard men disobey Gardiner's orders as to the method of catching seals, scaring the herd and delaying operations. The delay is a threat

because an early winter will block the passages with ice, trapping the sealers in the Antarctic. Eventually they are trapped, the Vineyard Sea Lion being forced out of the water onto the island by the pressure of the ice, and even crushed by the weight of the ice; while the Sag Harbor Sea Lion is embayed by the ice.

It now becomes necessary for the men to winter on the island, but the problem of fuel is a serious one. It is certain that the Vineyard Lion can never be repaired and floated, yet Daggett is so greedy he will not let himself believe the truth, nor let the Vineyard Lion be broken up for fuel. The men separate into two groups, Gardiner's men living in a shack on the beach, and Daggett's men on the Vineyard Lion, to make sure the others do not pull a sneak attack to break her up for kindling.

The story of the Antarctic winter is one of the most interesting of Cooper's tales, such as the system whereby the men are "hardened" to the winter by learning to take cold water baths each day, and to get along with as little fire as possible. Finally, when the fuel runs out, Gardiner is forced to begin dismantling the Sag Harbor Lion for fuel.

Through the whole winter, Gardiner, still a deist, disputes on questions of divinity with Stimson, a devout Christian and able seaman. Finally, when one day Gardiner's men hear calls for help and eventually reach the Vineyard Lion, they find most of the people dead, and are in danger of freezing to

death themselves until Stimson is able to kindle a fire. Only three of the Vineyard men remain alive.

In the spring, when the ice begins to open, Daggett dies of exposure suffered in the winter, the seals return to the island, and the Sag Harbor men begin refitting their craft from the timbers of the Vineyard Lion.

The scene shifts to Sag Harbor, where the Deacon is dying, and, since Gardiner is more than a year over due, the money conscious Deacon believes his investment is lost, and incidentally that Gardiner and his men are dead. But Gardiner sails into Sag Harbor, and the Deacon takes heart at the thought of the seal profit and fabulous treasure in gold that will now be his. In one of his better curtain scenes, Cooper has Gardiner report to the Deacon, and hand over the treasure, amounting only to some \$2,000, and the deacon expires with the bag of money in his hands. After the Deacon is buried, the relatives squabble over his money, but everything goes to Mary. She and Gardiner, converted by his experience in the south, marry, and settle down to a peaceful and comfortable life.

The Sea Lions has many features to redeem its sometimes overemphasis on religious matters. For instance, Cooper is almost ^{always} accused of being humorless. Yet in his treatment of the Deacon and the people at Sag Harbor, or even in the family tiff over the Deacon's will, the most anti-Cooper man would find laughable scenes. True, some of Cooper's humor is sardonic, but on the whole it is honest humor with a pleasant twist.

Quite naturally the work is interlarded with gems of wisdom, in Cooper's usual catechising fashion. At one point Cooper interrupts the narrative to point out that his friend Samuel F.B. Morse, is the true inventor of the telegraph, there being some litigation on the point at the time. He also registers a few slams at the Whig party, but on the whole is willing to content himself with the tale, penning such descriptions as that of the Deacon who finds so painful the idea of parting from his money that he will not hear a suggestion that he make a will.

Cooper had a serious purpose in writing The Sea Lions, as he stated in the preface to the first edition: "In this book the design has been to portray man on a novel field of action, and to exhibit his dependence on the hand that does not suffer a sparrow to fall unheeded."²² The novel field of action was well chosen, and it seems certain that Cooper was the first to use polar regions and polar exploration in fiction, although such writers as Jack London were to capitalize on it later. In the years preceding publication of The Sea Lions, public interest had been stirred by the polar expeditions of Wilkes, Sabine, Ross, Franklin, and others, and in 1845 Wilkes had published the account of the four year navy exploring expedition which incorporated a report on the Antarctic. This is cited only to show that the charge of some critics is manifestly absurd that Cooper was in The Sea Lions

22. Ibid., 11.

merely reaching for the startling and bizarre as a background for his tale.

Perhaps it is only a coincidence, but Mrs. Stowe's The Minister's Wooing, uses a device of The Sea Lions, in sending the young hero to sea, the Bible of his mistress in hand, and through shipwreck coming home a confirmed Christian. This conversion is the crux of Cooper's problem in The Sea Lions.

Often had he wondered, while reading the Bible Mary Pratt had put into his hand, at the stubborn manner in which the chosen people of God had returned to their "idols" and their "groves", and their "high places"; but he was now made to understand that others still erred in the great particular, and that of all the idols men worship, that of self was perhaps the most objectionable. 23

This is a sample of Cooper's contribution to religious thought, serious, but not original; much rises to a more fervent plane, and in some parts Cooper wags a knowing finger at the reader concerning the merits of the Episcopal Church. Obviously, with greater artistry, The Sea Lions would have been a greater book, but Herman Melville, a consummate artist, could praise Cooper and The Sea Lions, when such an occupation was not a popular one.

Upon the whole, we warmly recommend The Sea Lions; and even those who more for fashion's sake than anything else, have of late joined in decrying our national novelist, will in this last work, perhaps, recognize one of his happiest. 24

The number of Cooper's sea tales, thirteen, is alone enough to suggest that they were popular in his day, and

23. Ibid., p. 421.

24. James Grossman, James Fenimore Cooper, The American Men of Letters Series, William Sloan Associates, New York, 1949, p. 235.

some contemporary critics were willing to suggest that his true merit lay in that field.

We gladly turn to that class of his novels, on which, we believe our author's reputation will ultimately depend. He has opened a new mine of romance, by displaying the interest that attaches to a sailor's life, and the fortunes of the sea; and his success has been attested in the usual way, by a crowd of imitators. 25

While this opinion is disputable, Cooper was at least to make merchandising history in the sea story, even with a start toward the pocket-book system.

We are pleased to learn that the publishers have fixed the price of Wing-and-wing at half a dollar, lower by fifty per cent at least than an American novel has ever sold before. 26

Politically and socially Cooper was not partial to the Great Unwashed, but he was quite willing to hand out literary castile for cleansing the populace, a tendency which embarrassed even the friendly magazines. Graham's Magazine, which carried Cooper's name on the title page as a contributor and at various times published his naval Lives and Jack Tier, as well as a biography and picture of Cooper in August of 1844, in October of that year was forced to sound off in a review of Afloat and Ashore in a protest against "The guerilla war of sneers, sarcasms and innuendos, which the author wages upon everything in American manners and customs which he dislikes." 27

25. North American Review, January 1838, quoted in Marcel Clavel, op. cit., p. 197.

26. Book Review in Graham's Magazine, December 1842, p. 342.

27. Ibid., 1844, p. 192.

In a preface dated January 1, 1850, and written for a late edition of The Red Rover, Cooper complained of American history in a manner that has already been suggested in the foregoing pages in the opinion that the Naval History was primarily a foreward looking work because the actual history of the navy had little to compare with what Cooper envisioned for the navy and the country.

The history of this country has very little to aid the writer of fiction, whether the scene be laid on the land or on the water. With the exception of the well-known, though meagre incidents connected with the career of (Captain William) Kidd, indeed, it would be very difficult to turn to a single nautical occurrence on this part of the continent in the hope of conferring on a work of the imagination any portion of that peculiar charm which is derived from facts clouded a little by time. The annals of America are surprisingly poor in such events; a circumstance that is doubtless owing to the staid character of the people, and especially to that portion of them which is most addicted to navigation.²⁸

Seven years earlier, in Ned Myers, Cooper had been at the other pole, theorizing that "the life of any man, could the incidents be faithfully told, would possess interest and instruction for the reader."

Probably some of the bitterness of the Rover preface was induced by the fact that at the time several reform groups were levelling barbs at methods of naval discipline, attacks which Cooper was likely to consider a personal affront. Still

28. Ibid., i.

more likely, he had been disappointed politically, a fact which would color his writing from preface to epilogue.

When all the chaff of criticism is sifted, at least one grain of undisputed nature is found patent to all: Cooper originated the pattern of the American sea story, excelled in his own day, and used it to express his ideas on matters religious, social, and particularly political.

CHAPTER IV

The History and the Lives

It was plainly to be seen, as Cooper pointed out, that a large navy was actually indispensable to the nation which would be truly economical. This large navy would need a corps of efficient officers and men; but Cooper worked on the theory that efficient officers would see that their men were both obedient and efficient, and centered his arguments on personnel on the need for a rigid system of rank and promotion. The United States Navy had never had an admiral, and Cooper wanted that rank created for his countrymen, especially since Englishmen had had admirals as early as 1650, maneuvering one hundred ship fleets.

The policy of the navy has been characterised by acts of...vassillating and short-sighted nature; and thus...veterans have lingered in the stations they have held for quite forty years, through the neglect of the proper authorities to create a new and superior rank.... ...the corps...is entitled at all times, to have its interests protected by a uniform, consistent, rigidly just, and high-toned code of civil regulations. 1

The question of rank, too, was to pervade the later sea tales. In The Two Admirals, Cooper wrote:

In the course of a checkered life...we have been thrown into contact with no less than eight English admirals of American birth; while it has never yet been our good fortune to meet with a countryman who has had this rank bestowed on him by his own government. ...(Any one of these

1. History, II, 60.

commanders) might have toiled for half a century in the service of his native country and been rewarded with a rank that would merely put him on a level with a colonel in the army! 2

Naturally the rank question would be reflected in the Lives, and Cooper touched off half a dozen broadsides to the effect that "The service requires an entirely new arrangement of its grades, as well as the establishment of some that are new, in order to impart to it fresh life and hope." 3

Cooper charged that the congress had "neglected" the navy, and asserted that it had been "a leading defect of the civil administration of the military affairs of the American government, that too little of professional feeling has presided in its councils...." 4

In the Life of Preble, Cooper issued another of several blasts at the naval administration of the country, finding that "as a directing spirit capable of wielding the force committed to its care with activity and intelligence, it did not then, nor has it since existed in any emergency. In an intellectual, professional sense, the navy has scarcely had a head, nor is it likely to possess one while the selections of its chiefs are made from among state-court lawyers, ex-masters of merchant vessels, and politicians by trade." 5 The phrase "existed in any emergency" must be taken

2. The Two Admirals, pp. 2-3.

3. Lives, I, 154.

4. History, I, 215-216.

5. Lives, I, 246-247.

to mean that "activity and intelligence" had not existed. The tone of Cooper's meaning is always clear, although his word choice often occasions wonder.

Indeed, so vigorous and repeated were Cooper's accusations and suggestions regarding administration of the navy that the Whig newspapers of the day stated editorially that Cooper was seeking the position of secretary of the navy. ⁶

The training of naval officers also came under fire. Cooper deplored the fact that many officers had been recruited from what he termed the "rude and imperfect school of the merchant service." He agreed that the merchant service did not lack for "competent navigators or brave seamen," but thought that this service did not promote the "high moral qualities which are indispensable to the accomplished officer...."⁷ Although proud of the early record of the navy, Cooper admitted that some of the officers were not up to standard, and excused their conduct because of lack of training.

The habits of subordination; the high feelings of personal pride and self respect that create an esprit de corps, and the moral courage and lofty sentiments that come in time, to teach the trained officer to believe any misfortune preferable to professional disgrace, were not always to be expected under such circumstances. ⁸

In sum, it is "as much a regular qualification in the accomplished naval captain, to be able to make distinctions that

6. T.R. Lounsbury, James Fenimore Cooper, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Cambridge, 1884, p. 173.

7. History, I, 48.

8. Ibid., I, 48-49.

shall render him superior to sophism..., as to work his ship."⁹

Cooper felt the highest regard for the marine corps, which has always been administered as a department of the navy, and dedicated the History to the navy in general and the marines in particular. Still, he was indifferent, not to say contemptuous of common seamen, and on one occasion wrote that a fact had been ascertained "by means of an intelligent seaman on board the Scourge."¹⁰ The man was not named, and the word "intelligent" seems unnecessary.

Although a romantic by trade, Cooper was a realist if not a classicist in temperament. In commenting on the treatment of sailors, he wrote in the preface to the 1849 edition of The Pilot:

It is not easy to make the public comprehend all the necessities of a service afloat. With several hundred rude beings confined within the narrow limits of a vessel, men of all nations and of the lowest habits, it would be to the last degree indiscreet to commence their reformation by relaxing the bonds of discipline, under the mistaken impulses of a false philanthropy. It has a lofty sound, to be sure, to talk about American citizens being too good to be brought under the lash, upon the high seas; but he must have a very mistaken notion who does not see that tens of thousands of these pretending people on shore, even, would be greatly benefitted by a little judicious flogging. It is the judgement in administration, and not the mode of punishment, that requires looking into.... 11

- 9. Ibid., I, 161.
- 10. Ibid., II, 272.
- 11. Ibid., iv.

II

Cooper had insight into the history of the English navy and its relation to English commerce. Further, he perceived that if a navy is the "first line of defense" it is also the first line of offense. But before proceeding with Cooper's theories of naval policy and foreign policy it will be well to list several more or less widely accepted definitions and naval maxims.

Naval policy refers, in a general sense, to the size and disposition of fleets, and the functions of the fleets in the areas to which they are assigned. This name is changed to strategy in wartime, the term tactics being reserved to actions in which a fleet engages the enemy. The function of a navy is generally recognized to be that of keeping open the lines of communications, or, more explicitly, lines of transportation.

A fleet is said to have command of the sea when that fleet can enable its own marine to carry on commerce in a sea while denying those waters to enemy shipping. The terms "carry on" and "deny" are not, of course, meant in an absolute sense. A belligerent holding command may suffer losses from raiders, and enemy vessels may escape patrols. It is also possible that opposing powers may maintain communications in the same waters with neither side holding command, as in the Mediterranean Sea in the late war when the communications

lines of the belligerents bisected each other.

The purpose of naval operations may be said to be to aid and sustain armies which achieve the final decision. A distinction between foreign policy and naval policy may be seen in the sometime Open Door policy in China. Foreign Policy dictated the Open Door. Naval Policy dictated a small fleet and ill prepared bases. A combined policy would have made a door stop of the navy. This combination has long been a guiding principle in the history of sea power--- "a national policy of commercial expansion sturdily backed by foreign policy and wherever necessary by naval force." 12

It should be evident that a nation pursuing such a policy will prefer war to a restriction of its commercial interests. Without entering into a controversy as to the cause of war, the tone of these definitions will make it clear that a navy serves two main purposes: to transport armies, whatever may be the ultimate goal of those bodies; and to protect and control maritime trading areas.

Now Cooper arrived early at the conception of the combination of a world wide commerce and a large navy. He also voiced a cry of what might be termed American "Manifest destiny" with sea legs. Further, he was honest enough to reckon with the possibility of war, and he knew that the United States was already being recognized as a commercial rival of Great Britain, although he would put the rivalry

12. W.O. Stevens and A. Westcott, op. cit., p. 101.

the other way around. In 1807 the English war ship Leopard had fired on and subdued the American frigate Chesapeake after the Chesapeake's commander had refused an English order to heave to that a press gang might come aboard the Chesapeake to search for English deserters. In writing of this encounter Cooper voiced his opinion of American policy.

The assault of the Leopard on the Chesapeake, was replete with political lessons for the people of the United States. It showed the insults and outrages to which nations render themselves liable, when they neglect the means of defence; it demonstrated how boldly their great commercial rivals calculated on the influence of that spirit of gain which was thought to predominate in the councils of the republic.... But...the policy pursued by the American government, as a means of punishing the aggressors, and of vindicating the rights of the country, was quite out of the channel of correct reasoning. With a foreign trade that employed 700,000 tons of American shipping alone, Congress passed a law...declaring an unlimited embargo, for all the purposes of foreign commerce, on every port in the union; anticipating a large portion of the injuries that might be expected from an open enemy, by inflicting them itself! 13

Although the situation was not quite as simple as Cooper presented it, the statement serves to indicate his awareness of the commercial function of a navy.

As to the circumstances of the embargo of 1807, Cooper was either ignorant of foreign developments, or deliberately misrepresented the facts. There can be little doubt that American policy was influenced by English and French moves.

In the Berlin Decree of November, 1806, Napoleon had invoked his Continental system, a "paper blockade" of England, which put under ban all European trade with England. Under this system goods of British origin, regardless of subsequent ownership, were confiscated or destroyed wherever French agents could lay hands on them. Neutral vessels were seized for entering British ports, or even submitting to British search. England had retaliated with the Orders in Council of November, 1807. The Orders had as a motive to compel the aid of neutrals by excluding neutral ships from the continent unless they should first enter British ports, pay British dues, and thus assist in carrying on British trade. Napoleon had lined up all of Europe in his scheme to cut off the markets of English trade, but the scheme cracked when the Czar opened his ports in 1810-1811, and the Orders in Council were revoked on June 23, 1812, five days after the United States had declared war on England.

But this over-simplification, to adopt the lenient view, is typical of much of the History. Cooper apparently possessed more enthusiasm than historical perspective.

For instance, he does not mention the one naval action that is regarded by later historians as having an important bearing on the Revolutionary War, the Battle of the Virginia Capes which resulted in the French Fleet sealing off Chesapeake Bay, the avenue by which Cornwallis had hoped to effect an evacuation. True, this action did not involve the

American navy, but it would have made a prime local example of the value of a navy, examples in which the American Navy was sadly lacking at the time of Cooper's writing.

Indeed, it was this lack of examples of American naval prowess which forced Cooper to the position of what the navy should be in America, and what it would be with a "very moderate application of that dormant power, which, when properly applied, can at any time give the republic a commanding influence in the general concerns of the world." ¹⁴ It should be remembered that when the History appeared no American fleet had ever engaged an enemy on the sea, although Preble had commanded a small squadron engaged in shore bombardment against the Barbary pirates, and Perry and Mc Donough had won squadron victories over the British in actions on Lake Ontario and Lake Champlain in the War of 1812. Add to this the fact that there was, at least according to Cooper, a widespread belief as to the excellence of the English and the invincibility of British ships and sailors, and here was another theme that cried out for comment.

In Afloat and Ashore he wrote:

The miserable moral dependence of this country on Great Britain, forty years since, cannot well be brought home to the present generation. It is still too great, but has not a tithe of its former force. ¹⁵

It is not too much to say that Cooper could speak from experience here, for his first novel, Precaution, was an

14. History, II, 8.

15. Ibid., p. 470.

English manners novel, and purported to have been written by an Englishman, although it is clear he was early weaned from his inspirational mother.

But in the History he could at least cite minor examples to bolster his beliefs:

As this was the first combat of the war (1812 between the Wasp, American, and Frolic, British) between vessels of a force so nearly equal as to render cavilling difficult, the result occasioned much exultation in America, and greatly increased the confidence of the public, in supposing an American ship had quite as many claims to conduct, courage, and skill, as her enemies. Persons of reflection attached but little importance, it is true, to the mere fact that a few cruisers had been taken in single combat, but the idea of British invincibility was destroyed, and the vast moral results were distinctly foreseen. 16

Obviously Cooper considered himself one of the "persons of reflection" and in consequence a fit commentator on naval theory as well as naval policy. Remarking on new weapons, Cooper observed that in 1777 Dave Bushnel "made several unsuccessful attempts to blow up the ships of the enemy by means of torpedoes, a species of warfare that it can hardly be regretted has so uniformly failed, since its tendency is to aggravate the evils of hostilities, without essentially conducing to bring them to termination." 17

But torpedoes had not uniformly failed. Robert Fulton had developed submarines and marine mines to a

16. Ibid., II, 65-66.

17. Ibid., I, 83.

fairly high degree, and about 1802 interested Napoleon in the project. The scheme was vetoed by the French admiralty as "immoral" and contrary to the laws of war, approximately Cooper's attitude. Later England negotiated with Fulton, but when the French fleet was, for all practical purposes, annihilated at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805, there was no further need for Fulton's weapon. "As the old Admiral Earl St. Vincent remarked, 'Pitt (prime minister) would be the greatest fool that ever existed to encourage a mode of war which they who command the sea do not want and which if successful would deprive them of it.' So Fulton took 15,000 pounds and dropped his schemes." ¹⁸ The digression is worthy only in that it takes the edge off Cooper's oracular pronouncements.

Although the History is filled with statements as to the grand destiny of America and her navy, it is strongly lacking in any mention of developments of the period during which the work was being written, developments which forced changes in modes of naval warfare which had existed for 300 years. For instance, the introduction of steam vessels made ships independent of wind, enabling them to reach any desired point at a predetermined time. Robert Fulton launched the first steam man-of-war, the U.S.S. Fulton, in 1815. Ericsson's successful application in 1837 of the screw

18. W.O. Stevens and A. Westcott, op. cit., p. 253.

propeller rendered obsolete the side paddle wheel and made steam feasible for warships. Here was meat for propagandizing, but Cooper declined to feast on it.

In Afloat and Ashore he did condescend to mention steamer and Ericsson's screw, and give it out that in his opinion such craft were "the safest in the world."¹⁹

This does not mean that Cooper was unaware of naval theory. He cited examples "to prove the important military position, that ships cannot withstand forts when the latter are properly constructed, armed, and garrisoned."²⁰ The longevity of this belief is evidenced in the British base at Singapore prior to the late war, a base no fleet in the world would have dared approach, although the fort fell quickly from the land side. But, like naval officers whom Cooper would endow with most of the characteristics of the heroes of his romances, he conceived of war as something of a gentleman's affair. As regards privateers, private vessels commissioned by a government to raid enemy shipping, Cooper called it a "profession of which reason and good morals can scarcely approve; for whatever may be its legality, its aim is to turn the waste and destruction of war, to the benefit of private avarice."²¹ The aim of privatering was to effect a policy of attrition on enemy shipping similar to the aim of submarine warfare, the motive of private persons being financial.

19. Ibid., p. 433.

20. History, I, 70.

21. Ibid., I, 130.

Cooper took a slightly different view of commerce raiding by naval vessels, but only slightly different. Writing on an American attack on a British convoy, Cooper suggested:

In this affair, Captain Thompson discovered a proper spirit, for he might easily have cut out of the fleet half a dozen merchantmen, but he appears to have acted on the principle that vessels of war should first seek vessels of war. 22

Cooper displayed a knowledge of tactical theory, especially as regards the speed of vessels. An example of later speed theory may help in emphasizing Cooper's stand on the problem. In the late war many naval men came to look on the Pearl Harbor fiasco as a boon to naval tactics. The theory here was that the sinking of old, and necessarily slow, vessels, necessitated the building of new high-speed capital ships, battleships capable of swift movement in a naval war which revolved greatly around air strikes launched from aircraft carriers. Obviously, if the older battleships had not been sunk, they would have been employed in these carrier strikes, reducing the speed of the operations to the speed of the slow moving battle ships.

In the days when vessels depended on wind, the principles of construction that related to the working of war craft were of special importance, and Cooper continually pounded away at the need for uniform qualities of performance.

The vice-admiral was familiar with that all-important fact--one that members equally of Congress and of Parliament are so apt to forget or rather not to know at all--that the efficiency of a whole fleet, as a fleet, is necessarily brought down to the level of its worst ships. Of little avail is it, that four or five vessels of a squadron sail fast, and work well, if the eight or 10 that remain behave badly, and are dull. A separation of the vessels is the inevitable consequence, when the properties of all are thoroughly tried; and the division of a force is the first step towards its defeat; as its proper concentration is a leading condition of the victory. As the poorer vessels cannot imitate the better, the good are compelled to regulate their movements by the bad; which is at once essentially bringing down the best ships of a fleet to the level of the worst; the proposition with which we commenced. 23

But this was not a new theory; it was only one that needed to be widely disseminated. And this must be considered as one of Cooper's major contributions to the writing of American naval history, the broadcasting of American naval requisites to the American public, both in the History and the Lives.

III

Cooper was fond of repeating both outrightly and in a backhand manner that the navy was too small. Sometimes the phraseology would even be the same. In Miles Wallingford he wrote:

Then an American shipmaster is usually superior to those of other countries. This

arises from some of the peculiarities of our institutions, as well as from the circumstance that the navy is so small. 24

In the Life of Bainbridge the tune had nearly the same notes.

The merchant service of America has ever been relatively much superior to that of most other countries. This has been owing, in part, to the greater diffusion of education; in part to the character of the institutions, which throws no discredit around any reputable pursuit; and in part to the circumstance that the military marine has not been large enough to give employment to all of the maritime enterprise and spirit of the nation. 25

Not only did Cooper broadcast suggestions for major changes in national and naval policy, but often dropped the tone of his study to incidents, making, for instance, the nation's first plea for the return of war dead. In the Tripolitan War Lt. Richard Somers and a crew of volunteers had attempted to sail a ship loaded full of explosives into the enemy harbor, with the intention of firing the ship, escaping by boat, and blowing up the enemy fleet and town. Unfortunately the ship blew up on the inward voyage, without damaging the enemy. The bodies of Somers and two others were recovered by the enemy and buried in a common grave.

Here, then, lie the remains of Somers, and his two gallant friends; and it might be well to instruct the commander of some national cruiser to search for their bones, that they may be finally incorporated with the dust of their native land. Their identity would at once be established by the number of the skeletons, and the friends of the deceased might experience a melancholy consolation in being permitted to drop a

24. Miles Wallingford, p. 82.

25. Lives, I, 14.

tear over the spot in which they would be finally entombed. 26

But on the whole Cooper confined himself to larger issues. The question of a series of grades for officers makes a prime example. As has already been stated, Cooper had a good deal to say about rank. The general opinion among legislators seemed to be "What difference does it make, as long as we have captains for ships?" Cooper, then, considered it necessary to make a crusade showing the reason for an increased rank. In the "Life Of Bainbridge" he wrote:

To this vessel Bainbridge was appointed, with the commission of lieutenant-commandant; a rank that was subsequently and wisely dropped; for the greater the number of gradations in a military service, while they are kept within the limits of practical necessity, the greater is the incentive for exertion, the more frequent the promotions, and the higher the discipline. First lieutenants and lieutenant-commandants exist, and must exist in fact, in every marine; and it is throwing away the honourable inducement of promotion, as well as some of the influence of a commission, not to have the rank while we have the duties. It would be better for the navy did the station of first lieutenant, or lieutenant-commandant, now exist, those who hold the commissions furnishing officers to command the smallest class of vessels, and the executive officers of ships of the line and frigates. 27

There was also the recurring theme that the army has rank, why not the navy?

A captain in command of a squadron, now, ranks temporarily with a brigadier-general. The youngest captain on the list may hold this trust, yet, when he lowers his pennant, or even when he meets his senior

26. Lives, I, 111-112.

27. Ibid., I, 15.

in service, though in command of a single ship, the date or number of the commission determines the relative rank of the parties. 28

And a similar theme might be expected to appear in the fiction:

The two captains and Wycherly followed the vice-admiral into the after-cabin, where the latter seated himself on a small sofa, while the others took chairs, in respectful attitudes near him, no familiarity or jocularly on a part of a naval superior ever lessening the distance between him and those who hold subordinate commissions--a fact that legislators would do well to remember, when graduating rank in a service. 29

As has been pointed out, Cooper thought Commodore Edward Preble, the Tripolitan commander, the most brilliant man in the history of the navy, and Preble could be cited as an example in the high rank argument:

Every man in his (Preble's) squadron knew and felt that he was governed; though it is not improbable that Preble was, in a degree, aided in the exercise of his authority, by the fact that an entire grade existed between his own rank and that of all his commanders. A stronger practical argument in favor of the creation of admirals cannot be cited, than the manner in which Preble held all his vessels in hand, during his operations against Tripoli. 30

Undoubtedly one reason for Cooper's partiality to Preble was that Preble was the first American naval officer to command a squadron or fleet in action against an enemy. Fleets actions in the War of 1812 took place on fresh water lakes. The greatest competitor for Preble's crown of glory

28. Lives, II, 97-98.

29. The Two Admirals, pp. 408-409.

30. Lives, I, 250.

was Paul Jones, hero of ship duels with the English. The psychology involved in lauding either of the two men considering Cooper's theories and hopes, necessarily involves the question of fleet operation as compared with single combat, and in this aspect Cooper tended to favor Preble, while denying nothing to Jones on the question of personal courage. Even in The Pilot, in which Jones is not named, but still recognized as Jones, Cooper played down Jones' glory.

His devotion to American proceeded from desire of distinction, his ruling passion, and perhaps a little also from resentment at some injustice which he claimed to have suffered from his own countrymen. He was a man, and therefore not without foibles--among which may have been reckoned the estimation of his own acts; but they were most daring, and deserving of praise! Neither did he at all deserve the obloquy he received from his enemies. His love of liberty may be more questionable; for if he commenced his deeds in the cause of these free states, they terminated in the service of a despot!! (Catherine of Russia) He is now dead--but had he lived in times and under circumstances when his consummate knowledge of his profession, his cool, deliberate, and even desperate courage, could have been exercised in a regular and well-supported navy, and had the habits of his youth better qualified him to have borne, meedly, the honors he acquired in his age, he would have left behind him no name in its lists that would have descended to the latest posterity of his adopted country with greater renown. 31

The "Life of Jones" was written from the same slant-- Jones was tough and able, but what a pity he was not a greater man; if he had lived later, he would have won re-

noun as the top of the list of naval officers. The History has a similar expression. "Had circumstances put him in a situation of high command, there is little doubt that he would have left a name unsurpassed by that of any naval captain, or have perished in endeavoring to obtain it." 32 The significance of this treatment of Jones is to show the consistency and extent of Cooper's big-fleet, high-rank though, at least from the publication of The Pilot in 1823, through the Lives in 1844 until his death in 1851.

In the "Life of Preble" Cooper ticked off the whole list of naval heroes, comparing each with fleet commander Preble, and finding each to be a lesser man:

...it may be questioned if any other name in American naval annals has as high a place in the estimation of the better class of judges, as that of Preble.

...yet no man competent to judge of merit of this nature would think of comparing Hull to Preble.... The names of neither Lawrence, Bainbridge, nor Perry, will ever be placed by the discriminating at the side of that of Preble....

Paul Jones alone can claim to be placed on the same elevation as to resources and combinations, but few who are familiar with the details of the events concerned with both, would think of placing even Jones fairly at Preble's side. 33

By playing down Jones' role, in good faith, of course, Cooper could show the public mind that single combat as regards naval action has no value to the war fleet. The war fleet is a defensive-offensive unit, while single combat serves only propaganda or commercial purposes.

32. Ibid., I, 118.

33. Lives, I, 244-245.

One of the reasons Cooper voted against Jones was that Jones had no naval training, as even Cooper's contemporaries had little enough. Officer training, then, was a problem that should be presented to the public, but strangely enough Cooper had few suggestions to offer beyond the general shout of the need for "possessing a corps of trained and instructed officers to command vessels of war...." ³⁴

It may be that Cooper was opposed to the establishment of the Naval Academy at Annapolis, although such opposition would seem to be in violation of his own principles. Navy Secretary George Bancroft established the Academy in 1845, following a lead voiced as early as 1830, and clearly enunciated in the annual report of Navy Secretary J.K. Paulding, November 30, 1838,³⁵ Still, in the "Life of Berry", published in Graham's Magazine in 1845, Cooper took a slam at shore training.

This was a fair rate of preferment, and one that would be observed even at the present time, with a proper division of the grades, and a judicious restriction on the appointment of midshipmen, a class of officers that ought never to be so numerous as to allow of idleness on shore, and which, in time of peace, should be so limited as to give them full employment when at sea. ³⁶

If this brief bit was directed against the establishment of Annapolis, it was certainly not an example of militant opposition, for it was not followed up in any of the later publications.

34. History, I, 161.

35. Niles National Register, January 5, 1839, p. 248.

36. Lives, II, 160.

One shaft of Cooper's criticism was levelled at the nation's legislators who were, for the most part, devoid of military theory and practice and who often "betrayed that ignorance of the details of the service (navy), which has been so common in the legislature of the country, omitting many directions that were indispensable in practice, and laying stress on others that were of little or no moment."³⁷

A good Democrat, although certainly not party line, Cooper often went out of his way to vindicate Jefferson from the charge of hostility to the navy:

While Jefferson affected, and probably felt, a profound respect for legality, he is known to have used the power he wielded with great political fearlessness.

They prove even more in favor of the statesman, as they show that he did not deserve all the accusations of hostility to this branch of the national defenses that were heaped upon him; but rather that he was disposed to stretch his authority to foster and advance it. The introduction of a new class of vessels, too, required the revival of a class of officers of a rank proper to command them; and, though we wish never to see illegality countenanced in the management of interests as delicate as those of a marine, it is desirable to see the proper authorities of the country imitate this feature of the case, now that the republic has fleets which flag officers (admirals) alone can ever lead with a proper degree of dignity and authority. ³⁸

But while Jefferson might receive an occasional pat on the back, the legislature, including any and all legislatures, was a universal culprit, guilty of the most dastardly neglect.

37. History, I, 192.

38. Lives, I, 98.

...it may well be questioned, if any impartial person (probably Cooper), who coolly examines the whole subject, will not arrive at the conclusion, that the real delinquents (Congress) were never put on trial. It must be remembered that in the year 1807, America possessed the experience of three naval wars; that by the force of things, she had created a corps of officers...which had no superior...; that her artisans put on the ocean as fine vessels of their classes as floated, and that the confiction of the necessity of an efficient marine was deep and general. In the face of all these striking facts, it is seen that four months were required to fit a single frigate for sea, at a yard immediately under the eyes of Congress....

It is an axiom, as true as it is venerable, that a "divided power becomes an irresponsible". Such, in fact, is the nature of the authority wielded by the national legislature, the neglect of which, in the way of military preparations, would long since have ruined most of the statesmen of the country, had they been guilty of the same omissions, as individuals, that they had sanctioned as bodies of men. We may lament the infatuation, condemn the selfishness, and denounce the abandonment of duty, which impel ambitious politicians to convert the legislative halls into arenas for political controversies that ought never to degrade their deliberations, or impair the sanctity of their oaths; but when we find the consequences of such unconstitutional innovations putting in jeopardy the lives and honours of those who are subject to martial law, a solemn and reproofing sentiment must mingle with the views of every honest citizen, as he maturely considers the hardships of the case. 39

Legislators, then, had failed the navy, and while this was easily demonstrated, it was equally easy to show that navy men were superior diplomats. Writing of the negotiations of negotiations with the Bey of Tunis in 1805 after the signing

of a treaty with Tripoli, Cooper suggested:

But times had changed. The temporary control of events had been taken out of the hands of timid politicians at a distance, and had passed into those of men on the spot, who desired nothing better than to teach the barbarians justice. 40

Quite naturally the way to "teach the barbarians justice" was by vigorous prosecution of war, but then "the infatuated notion that wars are over is a chimera of speculative moralists"--the key stone of all Cooper's naval thought and theory.

War was always implicit in Cooper's writings, and he repeatedly accused American newspapers of having thrown sand in the eyes of the citizenry regarding the power and efficiency of the English navy.

But Preble had served in the Revolution, and, while he knew that an English ship was usually to be respected, he also knew that she was far from being invincible. It is a proof of the influence of the current literature and newspaper opinions of the day, that all the old officers of the Revolution had a far less exalted idea of English prowess, at the commencement of the war of 1812, than the bulk of the population. 41

With a strong anti-British feeling running at the time of publication of the History, Cooper did not fail to take his licks at England.

It is a matter of notoriety that the legal authorities of that country (England) export families of paupers to this hemisphere, in order to be relieved from them. 42

It ought to be mentioned too, that a base and selfish policy prevailed, in that day, on the subject of the Barbary Powers, among the principal maritime states

40. History, II, p.

41. Lives, I, 196.

42. History, II, 35.

of Europe. England, in particular, was supposed to wink at their irregularities, in the hope that it might have a tendency to throw a monopoly of the foreign navigation of the Mediterranean into the hands of these countries which, by means of their great navies, and the proximity to the African coast, were always ready to correct any serious evil that might affect themselves. English policy had been detected in the hostilities of the Dey (of Algiers), a few years earlier.... 43

The primary significance of the History, and the Lives, must be recognized as an expression, a nationalistic expression, of Cooper's demand for a big navy to back ~~of~~ a destined expansion. A typical statement of this view is that the United States is "a Republic that has already taken its place among the great powers of Christendom, and which has only to be true to itself...to stand foremost in the rank of nations."⁴⁴ In fact Cooper certainly bears a relation to the war birds and expansionists satirized by Melville in the speech of Alano in Mardi: "Awake! Oh Vivenza. The signs of the times are portentous."⁴⁵ The first line of the preface to the 1846 edition for the History might almost serve for the model for Melville's satire: "The country appears to be touching on great events."⁴⁶ In any case, Cooper's stand is clear on the subject of destiny and expansion.

Cooper's best qualities as a naval historian lay in his enthusiasm and his access to sources. Apparently the History

43. Lives, I, 24.

44. History, I, 14.

45. Herman Melville, Mardi, Everyman's Library, p. 315.

46. Ibid., 1.

was born from long effort, for he announced before leaving for Europe in 1826 that he planned such a work. In a letter to Cooper, dated September, 1831, his friend William Dunlap, the painter, asked, "...when is J.F.C.'s History of the Navy of his country to appear?"⁴⁷ But the major work of writing and gathering material did not go on until later. As late as November 15, 1838, he was still combing his sources, for that day he wrote his wife from Washington: "I am gleaning away, with great success, and have the promise of much more. Barron, Porter, and Chauncey, (three top men in the department) are all here, and tomorrow I shall get to work in earnest."⁴⁸ Cooper went straight to the source for most of his material. For data on Paul Jones and the battle between the Bon Homme Richard and the Serapis, Cooper interviewed Captain Richard Dale, Jones' first lieutenant.

As for technical knowlege, Cooper was familiar with naval architecture as well as ship handling. Much of the language in the History is better adapted to sailors than civilians:

In jibing, the schooner carried away her main boom, but continuing to stand on, she ran into Holmes' Bay, and took a spar out of a vessel that was lying there. While these repairs were making the sloop hove in sight again, and the Margarettta stood out to sea.⁴⁹

Any landsman, while he could not explain all described here, could grasp the general meaning of the paragraph, but in other places he might have trouble.

47. Correspondence, I, 245.

48. Ibid., I, 385.

49. Ibid., II, 41.

Instead of the ends of the planks having been let into a rabbitting grooved in the stem itself, they had been fastened into one made by the junction of the apron-piece and the stem, so that when the piece was wrenched off, the seams of the woodends remained tight.⁵⁰

Yet the History was aimed at the general reader, and only on occasions, such as that cited, when technical explanation would benefit a naval student and yet not deter the landsman, did Cooper leave the general reader dangling.

IV

Later historians, on the whole, have voted against Cooper's historical judgement, notably in considering the battle tactics at Lake Erie in the war of 1812. Commodore Perry, long after the engagement charged that Jesse Elliot, second in command had not properly supported him. The dispute caused much bitterness in the department, and in the History Cooper found Elliot innocent of any charge of failure. Present day judgement is somewhere in between.

This splendid tradition (Perry at Lake Erie had 'Don't Give Up the Ship on flags') has fortunately outlived the forgotten controversy over Elliot's failure to support Perry properly during the battle which seems to have been mainly due to the backward state of tactical training and indoctrination at that time. ⁵¹

Like all good sailors, Cooper believed in sea serpents. In the "Life of Preble" he relates an instance of Preble chasing a monster in a boat, a monster whose head was ten feet out of the water, who was 100 to 150 feet long, and larger around than

50. History, I, 203.

51. Dudley W. Knox, op. cit., p. 119.

a barrel.⁵² Another officer told Cooper of seeing a similar creature twenty years after Freble's experience; Cooper believed him and ridiculed those who doubted the existence of serpents. And this is but one of the man's peculiar facets, that he should, as a rule, be such a stickler for evidence, yet, on the flimsiest of hearsay, chronicle the doings of sea serpents.

Critical literary opinion of the History has remained static since the day of publication; professional, or naval opinion has either rejected or failed to discover Cooper. But scholars these past one hundred years have approved with one voice.

The best contemporary historian, George Bancroft, who was an admirer of Cooper's 'genius, manly character and great career' said before the New York Historical Society that the History of the Navy was the 'Most admirable composition of which any nation could boast on a similar subject.' 53

Professor Lounsbury was more guarded, but equally laudatory:

Of the original work, it is safe to say, that for the period it covers it is little likely to be superseded as the standard history of the American navy. 54

The Cooper scholar Robert Spiller approximates Lounsbury's opinion:

Even the first edition made a bid to become the standard treatment of the subject, and, in many respects, it still retains this position. 55

52. Lives, I, 181.

53. Dorothy Waples, op. cit., pp. 227-228.

54. T.R. Lounsbury, op. cit., pp. 229-230.

55. Robert E. Spiller, Fenimore Cooper: Critic of His Times, Minton, Balch, and Company, New York, 1931, p. 273.

It will be noted that the later the opinion, the less territory it covers, and justly so, for Cooper's History is now more interesting to the antiquarian than the historian. The commentaries in the History killed the historical value of the work while making it a popular book in its time, and preserving the naval thought of the nation's first, if not greatest, naval historian.

In the Lives, Cooper did little more than re-hash the material already published in the History. The biographies were short sketches which presented some biographical data along with a detailed account of the naval event or events in which the subject had most prominently figured. But the major themes were there---national expansion--big fleet--fast fleet--additional rank--training--administration.

Cooper has often been accused of taking the middle ground on principle, regardless of the issue. But in the tale of Miles Wallingford Cooper objects to the principle, telling the story of three men squabbling over a problem in mathematics: the first said four and four make seven; the second said four and four make eleven; but the middle grounder, with perfect equanimity, said four and four make nine. Cooper chortled over this one and suggested that "much is produced that ought to be retained, and much is generated that ought to be rejected. ...the solution is in knowing how and when to make the proper distinctions."⁵⁶

56. Ibid., p. 36.

Cooper would not swallow the jingoism of "My country, right or wrong." Four and four did not make seven or nine, or eleven, but most emphatically eight. Expansion and a big fleet were as obvious as the two loops of the eight, and the problem remained to make the nation adept in addition; for in 1844 the effects of the war of 1812 were "just beginning to be made manifest in the policy of the republic; a fact, by the way, that is little understood at home or abroad." 57

It would seem that Cooper's stature as a naval historian must rest on his reputation as a novelist. He added nothing new to the perspective of naval history. He by-passed all mention of developments that were to revolutionize naval warfare, confining his themes to a belief in imperialism and a plea for a big navy, a demand for high rank and a rigid system of promotion, and a stout declaration that the nation and her fleet were to occupy commanding positions in the world picture. This is not to say that Cooper was incompetent as a naval historian. On the contrary, as has been explained, he showed insight into naval theory, training, and administration.

If Cooper was not one of the most profound of American naval historians, and when considered in relation to Captain Alfred T. Mahan, it is certain that he was not, he was at least early and adequate. Cooper wrote on the navy with sincerity and aplomb and must be recognized as the first American man of letters to present a cogent statement of the relation of the American navy to the security and defense of the nation.

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