

JULIAN STOCKWIN

“Get a life!”

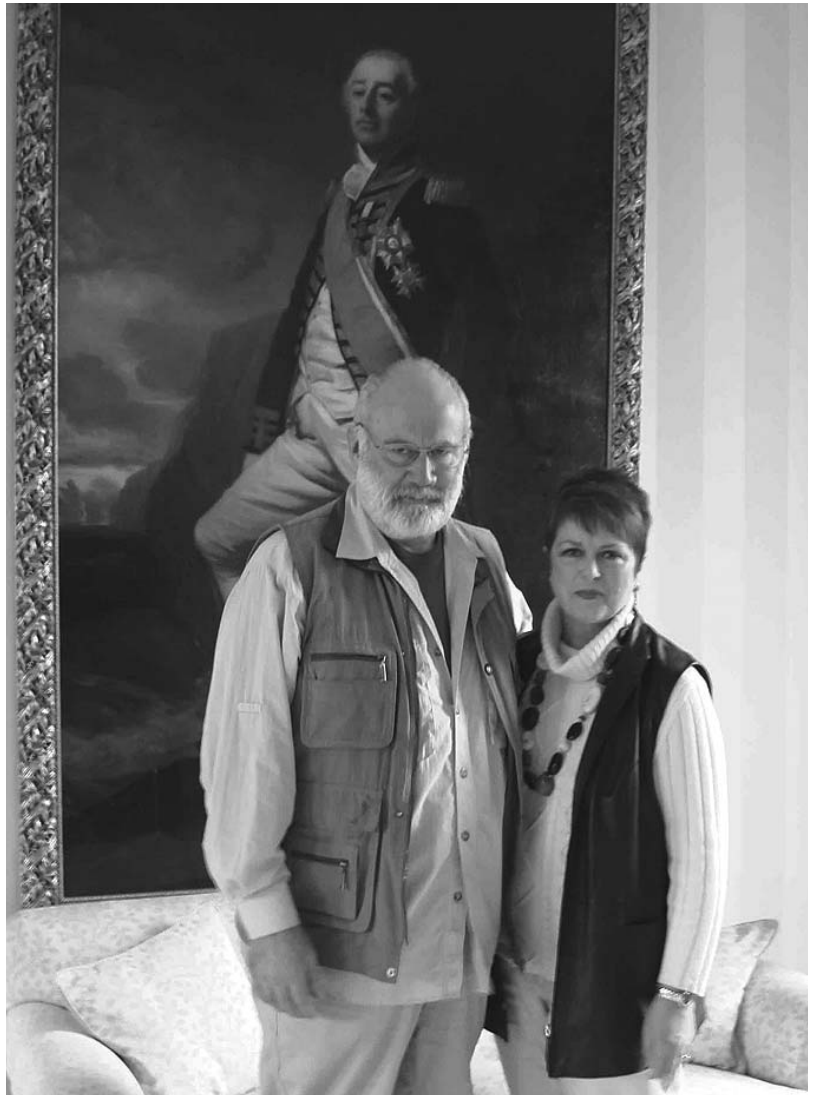
“... I hadn't the slightest intention of putting pen to paper and writing a novel, let alone a series on the Age of Sail.”

Julian Stockwin's new Thomas Kydd naval adventure, *The Privateer's Revenge* (published as *Treachery* in the United Kingdom), is set in the Channel Islands. As with the previous Kydd novels, Stockwin and his literary partner and wife, Kathy, went on location, crossing the English Channel to Guernsey to research the ninth title in the Kydd series.

The author reflects on his journey as a writer and Thomas Kydd's amazing career in the Royal Navy in this interview with *Quarterdeck*:

Julian, tell us how you transitioned into a life of writing from your past careers.

Up until what seems just a few short years ago, I hadn't the slightest intention of putting pen to paper and writing a novel, let alone a series on the Age of Sail. I have my wife Kathy (an ex-magazine editor-in-chief) completely to



Julian and Kathy Stockwin in front of a portrait of Admiral Sir James Samaurez during their trip to Guernsey to research the new Thomas Paine Kydd naval adventure, *The Privateer's Revenge* (published as *Treachery* in the United Kingdom).

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blame. After having lived in Hong Kong for about 10 years (where I had moved into the computer field), I returned to the UK to head up a big software project. This was an extremely high pressure environment and in 1996, when I finally signed off on the work, my life was about to change forever. I sank into an armchair and Kathy thrust a large tumbler of whiskey into my hand, looked me straight in the eye, and told me in no uncertain terms to “get a life!” I guess there’s no answer to that! Without a single published work to my name she somehow knew that inside I was a writer (and that’s something I didn’t quite see at the time). She persuaded me to give away the systems analysis and take a half-time job at the local college as a tutor in computing. The other half of the time I began learning the nuts and bolts of the craft of writing.

Once I had agreed to try my hand at writing there could of course only be one subject for me – the sea! And I chose the period that had long fascinated me – the Great Age of Fighting Sail – to be the backdrop for whatever story I chose to tell, but I needed a focus. This all crystallized when I came across some incredible statistics. It seems that in the bitter French Wars at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there were, out of the 600,000 thousand or so seamen who served their King and country during that time, some 200 who by their own courage, resolution and brute tenacity made the awe-inspiring journey from the fo’c’sle as common seaman to King’s officer on the quarterdeck. This meant they changed from common folk to the gentry – becoming a gentleman this

way was no mean feat then! And of those 200, a total of perhaps 20 became captains of their own ship; and a miraculous five or so attained flag rank. We can’t be absolutely sure of the numbers as records are incomplete and not a one left any kind of record of their odyssey, how they must have felt, what impelled them to the top, but I knew that there I had my story. I’d write about one of those on his life journey from common seaman to admiral.

I have sometimes been asked whether I felt regret at not having

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become a writer earlier in my life, but I think the answer is no. Coming to writing later in life has meant that I’ve had varied and rich experiences all around the world, and in a number of careers, all of which I can now draw on to varying degrees when I write. Perhaps most importantly I have been both a seaman and an officer in the Navy, and these very different perspectives certainly help inform Kydd’s life journey.

Your current book, *The Privateer’s Revenge* (published as *Treachery* in the UK), is the ninth in the Kydd series. As you’re finishing the next book in the series (working title *Invasion*), how do you look back on this “early” part of your career?

I still have to pinch myself sometimes to remind me that I am a published author, not just of one book, but nine. When my tenth book comes out next year, I will have over a million words in print! Looking back on the early part of my writing career of course I can see some things in the books that I might do differently now, but on the whole I am proud of my creations. Kydd and Renzi seem so real to me (and have been so since the very start) that they inhabit a sort of parallel universe.

When I first started writing I aimed to do something that other writers in the genre had not done. I wanted to take the perspective of the common seaman as my point of view, instead of the more usual officer shouting orders from behind on the quarterdeck. I had always felt that justice had not been done to the memory of the eighteenth century seaman, and people’s perceptions were too encrusted with myths and stereotypes. The real men at sea in those days were neither saint nor sinner, noble nor brutish, they were common foremast jacks who rose to the occasion, and to me were the real heroes in those turbulent times. Obviously my central character Tom Kydd has now moved on and become an officer, but it is very gratifying that many readers have told me how much they enjoyed this early focus on the common man, so

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to speak, and the opportunity as a reader to grow and learn with Kydd.

Can you talk about the development of the Kydd character? As you began writing the novels, you must have imagined some sort of career trajectory for him. Have you “stuck to the script” with Kydd, or has his career taken any unexpected turns?

With my computer background, I started with a young man’s life at the beginning of his career at sea and then flow-charted out a number of books to cover his life and eventually becoming an admiral. There were some things I had to be aware of, such as the length of time necessary to serve before it was possible to move up to the next rank (or rate) in the Sea Service. I am also very particular about following the historical record so I could not have him in every fleet action as this would just be unrealistic. On the whole I have stuck with the script, as you put it, but the deeper I have got into the research the more I have become amazed at just how rich this period is for an author’s imagination. My original conception of the series was that it would be eleven books, that number is now revised upwards, considerably.

Tell us about your research mission for *The Privateer’s Revenge* (*Treachery*):

The Privateer’s Revenge was published simultaneously in the US and UK in October. Kathy and I spent a most enjoyable two weeks on location research in the Channel Islands for this book. I am a “visile” in that when I write I need to be able to see

things in my mind’s eye. Also, I feel there are certain intangibles about a place – the smells, the colors – you can only really get from actually being there.

I found the Channel Islands fascinating. Due to their geographical position, they have close links to both France and England. The capital of Guernsey, St Peter Port, retains much of its Georgian character, with splendid residences, many built by successful privateers or merchants of Kydd’s day. And the ancient castle of Mont Orgueil, which features in the

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book, still lies at the head of Gorey Bay in Jersey. As fiercely independent as ever, to the inhabitants of the Channel Islands the loyal toast will always be not to the Queen, but to the Duke of Normandy (actually one and the same)!

In addition to finishing a new Kydd novel, you are in the process of writing *Stockwin’s Maritime Miscellany*. What can you tell us about this nonfiction work?

In the course of my research during the writing of the Kydd series I continued to come across fascinating material that for one reason or another I could not incorporate into those books. I just squirreled it away, along with other snippets that I had found over the years, even before I started writing. I guess this is what attracted me to the *Age of Sail* in the first place. It really was such a colorful period!

This collection of data continued to grow and Kathy suggested that it would make a wonderful miscellany. My agent Carole Blake agreed, too, and I was delighted when Ebury Press, the largest publisher of general non-fiction in the UK, commissioned the miscellany. In the course of discussing the work with my editor at Ebury, Carey Smith, we decided to widen the project to include the period from the heroic Voyages of Discovery in the fifteenth century through the iconic Napoleonic wars to the glorious era of the greyhounds of the sea, the clipper ships. We also decided to go with black and white line drawings, many contemporary to the time, to illustrate the work. It’s been great fun working on this with Kathy and Carey, but I have to be very disciplined with my time as you can imagine.

Of all your Kydd novels, *The Admiral’s Daughter* generated some discontent among readers, albeit very small in number. What caused this reaction? Have you heard from any of these readers since the publication of *The Privateer’s Revenge* (*Treachery*)?

I have to tell you that *The Admiral’s Daughter* was a difficult book for me

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to write, dealing as it does with a terrible personal loss for Kydd. However in the context of the series I felt it was important. As happens in real life, I wanted to show that things do not always go smoothly. Sometimes people are thrown a real curve ball, and it is how they respond to personal tragedy and hardship that makes them interesting human beings. A few readers said they felt that Kydd should have stayed at sea just fighting the French, that women were an unnecessary distraction to the story. However I have always said I would never write formulaic fiction, I wanted to be true both to the times and to the way sailors really lived in those times. Mariners did come ashore, and they did have relationships from time to time, some permanent, some transient.

One reader recently got in touch with me and said this:

“I thoroughly enjoyed *The Admiral’s Daughter* right up to the last chapter, but the end left me feeling shocked and disappointed. I felt let down by the death of Kydd’s sweetheart. I spent the next year hoping things would get back on track, but concerned that the series had taken a turn in a direction that offered little hope for the future. I should have had more faith in you. *Treachery* put Kydd right back on track. I was thrilled by every twist and turn of the plot. The way misfortune turned to vindication was marvelous. Having read *Treachery* I reread *The Admiral’s Daughter* and this time, it was a totally different read. Knowing that Kydd and Renzi would go on to rise above their circumstances put the whole tragedy into a new perspective. I now realise

that the ending of *The Admiral’s Daughter* was a brilliant and brave stroke. I almost feel I should apologise to you for doubting your vision. Thank you for creating this wonderful series. I cannot tell you how much I am enjoying it.”

You have said that *The Privateer’s Revenge (Treachery)* is the first title in a trilogy within the Kydd series. What prompted this idea? What can you share with us about the two titles to come?

“... digging deep into the research for the build-up to ... the Battle of Trafalgar, I realized there was more than one story there.”

When I started digging deep into the research for the build-up to the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Trafalgar I realized there was more than one story there; in fact I felt it was a trilogy. In *The Privateer’s Revenge (Treachery)* we first see Kydd becoming really aware of the size of the French menace. Then in *Invasion* (book 10) he becomes centrally involved in the activities to counter the fearsome invasion plans of Napoleon. Finally, *Victory* (book 11) deals with the culmination of all

this, and tells the story of one of the grandest combat spectacles in history, the Battle of Trafalgar.

With *Invasion* completed and soon to be in the hands of your publishers, what are your plans for researching the next book in the series, *Victory*?

Victory will in many ways be one of the most challenging to date. It is the story of the Battle of Trafalgar. In early December, Kathy and I will travel to Portsmouth where I have been given permission to have special access to HMS *Victory*. Of course I already know the ship very well, but soon I will be familiar with every nook and cranny. As well, I will be consulting various experts and documentary sources in the libraries, museums and archives in Portsmouth.

You were recently presented with a brilliant scale model of HMS *Teazer*, Thomas Kydd’s first command. How did this come about? Where is the ship presently berthed?

About a year ago I was contacted by a reader called John Thompson, who told me how much he loved the series. We exchanged several emails and he then made the incredible offer to build me a model of whichever ship in the series I would like. After I got over the shock of such a generous gesture the choice was obvious: *Teazer*, Kydd’s first command. John kept a build log during the course of the project, which is on our website:

www.julianstockwin.com.

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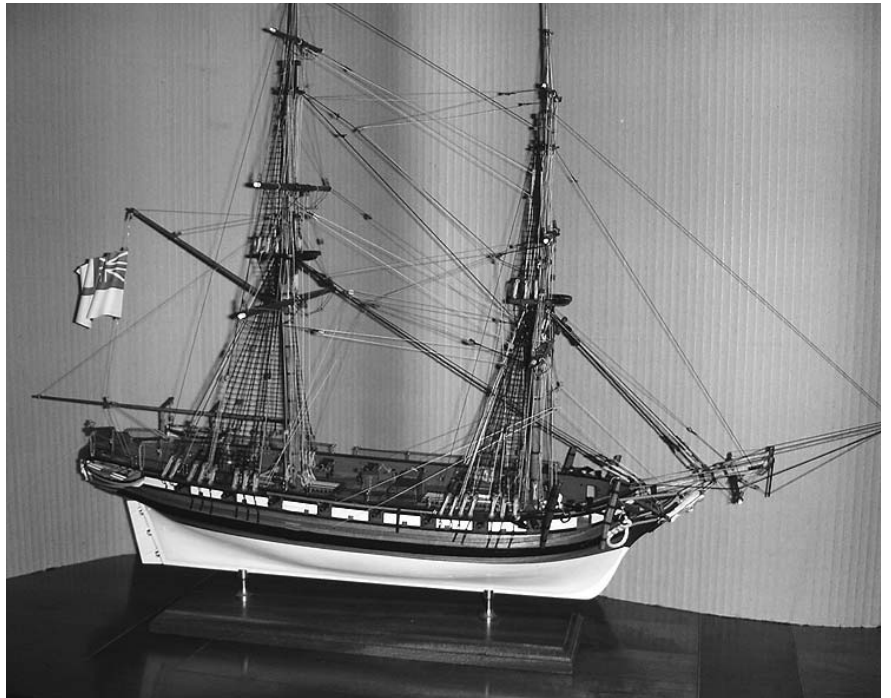
It was truly fascinating to watch the progress of the model from a few flimsy pieces of wood to the stunning creation John presented me with in October. In total, he put in over 850 hours on the ship! I was approached by the head librarian of Devon's newest library, at Ivybridge, who asked whether I would consider loaning the model for the official opening by Her Royal Highness Princess Anne? It was a great honour, and on the day I presented Princess Anne with a signed hardback of *Command*, which of course is the book in which Kydd first meets the lovely *Teazer*.

The model is now in our home, taking pride of place in the dining room, possibly the most nautical room in the house (my study excepted) as there are many sea prints by Derek Gardner, John Chancellor and Geoff Hunt adorning the walls.

Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

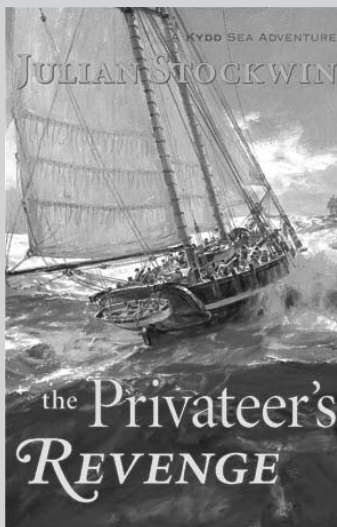
Just to say how very privileged I feel to be able to do what I do. When I first started out on this literary journey it seemed so daunting. Could I write one book, let alone a series? Now it is hard to imagine *not* writing about Tom Kydd and Nicholas Renzi.

It always gives me great pleasure to get emails from readers and I answer each one personally. So please do get in touch if you have any comments on the books (Julian@JulianStockwin.com). And why not enter the contest for a complete set of the Kydd books to date? There are two sets up for grabs!



British modeller John Thompson built this scale model of Kydd's first command, the little brig-sloop HMS *Teazer*, and recently presented it to Julian and Kathy Stockwin. Visit the Stockwin website (www.julianstockwin.com) for more photos and Thompson's project log.

Win a Complete Set of Kydd Naval Adventures



For a chance to win one of two complete sets of Thomas Kydd naval adventure trade paperbacks (US editions) to date (plus *The Privateer's Revenge* in hardback), answer the following question: In what year did McBooks Press publish its first book?

To enter the contest, send your answer via email to: Bosun@JulianStockwin.com. The deadline is December 15, 2008. Winners will be notified by email.