

JULIAN STOCKWIN

Seeking Authenticity

With ten Thomas Kydd sea adventures in print, Julian Stockwin says he's nearing the halfway mark in the series, as he looks ahead to the Battle of Trafalgar.

By George D. Jepson

English novelist Julian Stockwin is celebrated for authenticity in his Thomas Kydd sea adventures, which sweep across the oceans of the world during the time of Nelson. Whether describing late eighteenth century Malta or the shingle beaches along the English Channel, Stockwin knows of what he writes, because he has been there, walked the cobbled streets, paced along the shorelines, and lifted a glass or two in the ancient haunts of sailors from a bygone era.

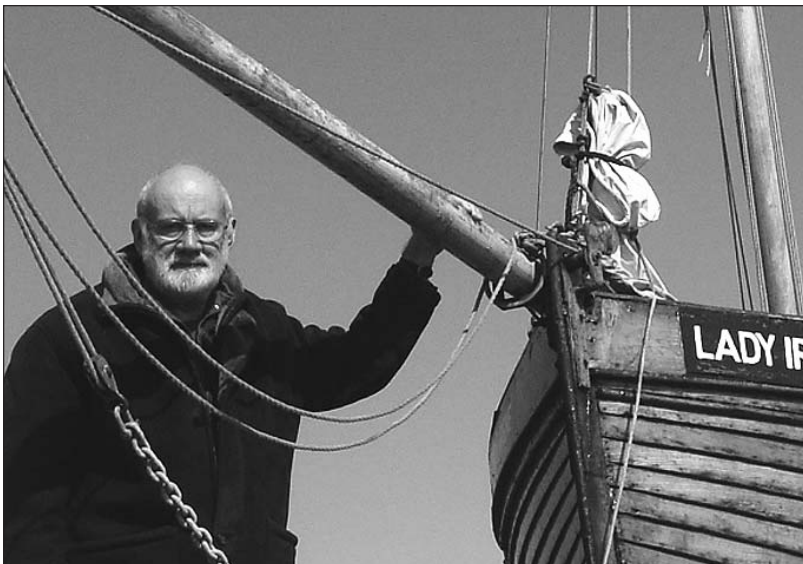
Stockwin reaches a milestone in the Kydd series, with the October publication of *Invasion*, the tenth title featuring Thomas Kydd and his particular friend Nicholas Renzi.

The author recently discussed the impact of his research travels on the Kydd novels with *Quarterdeck* in this interview:

Location research is very important to you as a writer. Where did you go for *Invasion*?

Location research has taken Kathy and me all around the world, from Canada to the Caribbean, but this book drew us much closer to home. Our travels for

Invasion focused on Kent, the garden county in the southeastern corner of England. Its boundaries are the River Thames to the north and the North Sea to the east, and the Straits of Dover and the English Channel to the south. France is just 21 miles across the Strait, clearly visible on a



Julian Stockwin with a lugger in Deal on England's Channel coast during his research trip prior to writing *Invasion*.

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clear day. As the target beaches for the invasion, it was the area of the biggest strategic importance for Britain during the Napoleonic Wars.

The town of Deal was an important port in Kydd's day, although it has no harbour, just a steep shingle beach. Its proximity to the notorious Goodwin Sands (which claimed thousands of ships and has been called the "Shippe Swallerer" since ancient days) made it a haven of shelter.

Much of Old Deal remains; around Middle Street a whole community of smugglers lived in inter-connecting passages and alleys, and as well as their little cottages there are splendid Georgian residences in the more fashionable parts. The Three Kings hotel (now the Royal) was used by naval officers as shore headquarters.

Kathy and I had a very pleasant meal there. It is on record that Admiral Nelson himself used to dine there.

The King's Naval Yard in Deal was a bustling complex in Kydd's time. Sadly no relics have survived other than the signal tower but we were able to pace out the area that once had eight capstans and slipways, sawpits, a smith shop, boat building house and a sail loft. There was also a separate victualling yard that baked ships biscuits by the thousands and brewed small beer.

As is our usual practice on location research we rented a small cottage in Deal as a base. From there we covered the other sites men-

tioned in the book – Walmer Castle, Dover Castle, etc. These fortifications date back centuries and some of their rooms are open to the public today.

Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger had a base at Walmer Castle, and through the kind permission of English Heritage I was given extensive access to both Walmer and Dover castle (where Robert Fulton, the maverick American inventor who features in the book, worked on his submarine inventions), and was able to see many areas not generally accessible.

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You describe *Invasion* as the second book in a mini-trilogy within the series. Can you explain the thinking behind this?

My ninth book, *Treachery*, published in America as *The Privateer's Revenge*, was the first of three books focusing on the growing impact of the threat of French invasion and the lead-up to the great Battle of Trafalgar. Each book ramps up the stakes, culminating in the Battle of Trafalgar in the third book, *Victory* (out next year), one of the grandest battle spectacles in history.

***Invasion* has a stunning new cover**

design. What was the reason for this change from the covers done by Geoff Hunt?

Larry Rostant has done a great job on this. He's a CGI [computer generated image] whiz and I was quite amazed at what he achieved. This is not to take away anything from Geoff Hunt's wonderful images, but books are now facing a more challenging retail market than ever before in an age of video games, etc.

My publishers decided to take the covers in a new direction after researching the market and concluding

that the books would appeal to a wider readership if they updated the jackets to reflect modern taste.

Historical fiction is extremely popular at the moment, and they felt that alongside some of the other authors

in the genre, the old cover style was beginning to look a little dated.

Their focus throughout the design process has been to update the style for modern readers, while maintaining the spirit of the previous books' covers in keeping with the expectations of my existing fans. While it is impossible to create a new cover that will make absolutely everyone happy the new one has proved very popular.

You take great pains to base your books on the historical record. What challenges — and advantages — does this bring?

The challenges are that history is

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not tidy and organized into nice plot-friendly chunks. You have to sift through a great deal of material to find the nuggets. And you can't change the historical record and have something happen before its time. However I find the disadvantages are more than outweighed by the advantages. The historical record is such a wonderful source of material to stimulate a writer's imagination. Sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction. You come across such larger than life characters in the period I write about that readers could be forgiven for thinking I have made them all up. Take for example one character from the historical record in *Invasion*, Robert Fulton. I suppose his inventions were the first weapons of mass destruction of the defenseless. A Maryland farm boy, he came to England by invitation and for a time lived as a portrait painter in Devon, near where I now live. He reached the status of having his work hung at the Royal Academy, no mean feat, but then inexplicably went across to Revolutionary France and within a year was working on his incredible submersibles! He actually met Bonaparte face to face, and demonstrated a working submarine. Then he came back to England and, well, you'll have to read the book ...

You're now author of ten published Kydd books (and a maritime miscellany). If you could go back in time, is there anything you'd change in the series?

I was fairly clear where I wanted the series to go from the beginning. It would start with a young man press-ganged into the Royal Navy and then chart his life story and incredible journey from the lower deck to eventually making admiral. Looking back I don't think I would change much, perhaps a few details here and there, but overall I am pretty pleased with my first ten Kydd books. I guess my computer background has been helpful in that I have flow-charted the specifics of each book, trying as much as possible to see ahead to consequences in future books of details in earlier

"Sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction. You come across such larger than life characters in the period I write about ..."

ones.

Over the years you've met many people in the course of your research and at author appearances. Can you tell us about some of them?

Very hard to pick just a few; I have been privileged to get to know many fascinating people in the course of working on the books. but I will limit it to three.

Kathy and I first met Canadian Bob Squarebriggs when we went to Halifax in connection with research for *Tenacious*. Bob heard we were to visit the city and emailed asking if he could meet up with us and have

me sign his collection of Kydd books. Bob also said he wanted to present a small gift to me, which turned out to be a superb half model of the crack frigate *Artemis* in which Kydd sees the world in my second book. Over the years Bob has become a friend and also gone on to make a wonderful model of the cutter *Seaflower*, which was the subject of several magazine articles. Bob's work is impressive in itself, but only later did I find out that he is daily fighting the effects of a severe road traffic accident – but he never complains.

Then there is Joseph Muscat, a quiet scholarly gentleman in Malta, who took us under his wing when we were there and shared his great knowledge of the craft of the Mediterranean. When I visited Malta he took me

around the Maritime Museum there, housed in what was the Old Naval Bakery of the Royal Navy. Last year Joseph brought out his magnum opus, *Sails Around Malta*.

And finally, I would like to mention the late Ron Butters. Not many people would have heard of him, but he was one of nature's gentlemen. In *The Admiral's Daughter* much of the story is set in the tiny fishing village of Polperro in Cornwall, and Ron really brought alive the rich fishing traditions of the area for me.

Of course there are scores of names I have omitted. I probably need another interview to cover

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these.

How has *Stockwin's Maritime Miscellany* been received? It's your first venture into non-fiction, isn't it?

Yes, my first non-fiction work. It was great fun to do, and I've been very pleased by the response so far. The Marine Society chose it as their Book of the Month for July, and I've had some very kind emails from readers, including a destroyer captain.

What role do your e-mail newsletter, *The Bosun's Chronicle*, and your website play for your readers?

When I gave up the day job, so to speak, and took the plunge to become a sea

writer I wanted to have a website that didn't just list the books I'd written, but was a real celebration of the sea and all those who share my passion for Nature's Realm. Over the years it has developed into quite a substantial sized site, with well over 100 pages. It is very gratifying that some visitors spend hours on the site exploring the various facets.

The Bosun's Chronicle is complementary to the website. There are now 4000 subscribers and it is a way for readers to get a monthly "Stockwin fix" until the next book comes out. I have purposely kept the newsletter in plain text so there is no danger of spreading viruses or malware to people.

We run contests on both the website and in the newsletter and these are always popular. They are not just for my books, but interesting sea titles from such publishers as Conway Maritime, who produce superb volumes.

Kathy has worked with you since the very early days. Describe a typical day for the two of you.

We're pretty early risers, so we are at our respective desks well before 9:00 AM. We each have a separate study,

"pace" in Longtimbers, the nearby reserve. That has not failed me yet. I find walking is very conducive to getting the creative juices flowing. Our working day ends around 8:00 PM (a little earlier for Kathy who will have prepared delicious vittles in the galley), when we sit down to dinner, and a nice glass of wine – if I have made my writing quota that day.

Kydd's next adventure after *Invasion* is *Victory*? How far into the future have you planned Kydd's adventures in the Royal Navy?

My initial plan for the Kydd series was eleven books, a monumental number it seemed to me in the early days! However, as I have delved further into this fascinating period, I've seen that I severely

underestimated that number. It now looks like Kydd and Renzi will go on for another dozen or so books. Of course, after *Victory* and the Battle of Trafalgar, there will be no more large-scale battles, but there are plenty of other challenges for Kydd as Britain develops her trade empire and sea supremacy to safeguard this. Kydd's next stop after *Victory* will be South Africa, but I don't want to give away the plot just yet.

Visit Julian Stockwin online at www.julianstockwin.com.

"... I was given extensive access to both Walmer Castle and Dover Castle ... and was able to see many areas not generally accessible ..."

connected via an intercom. Kathy sees her main function as keeping the outside world at bay, while I concentrate on writing. But in reality her role is much broader than that, she is a true literary partner to me, and I value her editorial judgment immensely. I work up until lunchtime, and then take a 40 minute nap after the meal. Mornings I find I am at my most creative in the writing sense, so afternoons are generally reserved for research and answering emails from readers. If I am confronted with a plot problem I will have a quick chat to Kathy about it, and usually this throws up a solution, or we pull on our walking shoes and go for a