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James H. Ellis, **Mad Jack Percival: Legend of the Old Navy** (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2002), retail \$34.95)

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One signal victory in a war-time duel at sea often seals the historical fate of a naval hero—Nelson at Trafalgar and Decatur at Tripoli come readily to mind. Other naval figures survive in naval lore as legends—colorful, but minor characters and, as such, only deserving of article-length treatment, and not the intense scrutiny of a biography. For one hundred thirty-one years after his death, the exploits, real and mythical, of John Percival survived only in short sketches until the naval biographer and diplomatic historian David F. Long in 1993<sup>[1]</sup> wrote what one reviewer termed “a scholarly, even-handed narrative” that will become “the standard account of Percival’s naval career.”<sup>[2]</sup> What then compelled James H. Ellis to publish, only nine years later, another biography of this irascible naval officer whose career spanned the first half of the nineteenth century? Did Ellis discover some treasure—trove of documents that sheds new light on Percival’s character and his place in naval history? No, Ellis uses the same material, but interprets it differently.

So, how mad was “Mad Jack”? Ellis retains the epithet in his title but downplays its significance. Legend portrays Percival as a stern, autocratic man. Ellis, however, is sympathetic to Percival, noting his admirable qualities while explaining away or glossing over his frailties. Repeatedly throughout the book Ellis cites examples of Percival’s humanitarianism. While he was “relentless in disciplining shirkers,” he “possessed an unusually soft heart.” He was a sailor’s sailor, remembered for “providing kind and humane care for the sick” and for personally

rescuing a drowning sailor, all of which instilled a "high degree of loyalty among his men."

The nineteenth-century navy engaged in the economic diplomacy of "showing the flag." Percival's mission to the Sandwich Islands in 1826 exemplifies the country's desire to protect the most favored nation status for American commerce abroad. Ellis approves of Percival's brusque treatment of American missionaries there in contrast to many earlier accounts that castigate him for his intemperate style. In both this instance and in reporting Percival's 1844–46 circumnavigation of the globe in the frigate *Constitution*, Ellis chastises those historians who write with their contemporary blinders on. He especially disparages Long's critique of Percival's efforts to free a French missionary in Cochin China in 1845. He also rebukes some unnamed "modern commentators" for seeing the "precursor of the modern Vietnam War" in Percival's bellicose actions there. Ellis attributes Percival's slow rise in rank to his losing tenure while an eight-year casualty of the demobilization of the Navy after the Quasi War with France. Perhaps it is more likely that in the post-War of 1812 era that a combination of a bloated service and Percival's cantankerous, undiplomatic nature resulted in his slow rise in rank.

According to series editor James C. Bradford, the Library of Naval Biography series intends that a "combination of clear writing, fresh interpretations, and solid historical context will result in volumes that restore the all-important human dimension to naval history and are enjoyable to read."<sup>[3]</sup> Certainly Ellis's biography is well-written and he does provide the reader with a new perspective of Percival's character. It is evident that Ellis wrote this book more to vindicate Percival's honor, as Professor Long's book already fully covers Percival's naval career. Long's characterization of Percival was influenced by his interpretation of Percival's handling of a trust fund that he superintended for several sailors injured during a railroad accident in 1836. Long accused Percival of "fleecing crippled sailors" by stealing their injury award. For Long, this incident was "a damning indictment of Percival's character" and the "worst blot on a generally honorable life." Through a more thorough study of the same financial records that Percival meticulously kept,

Ellis reached a diametrically opposed conclusion. “[H]onesty, prudence, and fairness” marked Percival’s actions not “improbability.” Ellis implies that Long’s misinterpretation of this incident has clouded that historian’s views toward Percival. Where Long sees a dishonest autocrat, Ellis sees a benevolent paternalist.

While Ellis used the same material on the trust case that was available to Long, the former delved deeper to exonerate Percival. Ellis should be commended for clarifying this episode. But Ellis has erred himself. For instance, the commander of HMS *Poictiers* was John Poo not J. B. Beresford. The frigate *Essex* entered U.S. naval service in 1799 not 1813. On page 33, Ellis mistook an American merchantman for the USS frigate *Macedonian*. Thomas Macdonough’s name is spelled McDonough in the text.

Ellis seeks to rehabilitate Percival’s character and he succeeds in portraying both his warts but also his humanitarianism. This biography has not superseded Long’s scholarly work, which remains important for its portrayal of the diplomatic role of the Navy in antebellum America. Ellis has added a sympathetic interpretation. What neither of them do, however, is to address the social context of life in the Navy. Discussing issues of naval education, medical care, discipline, flogging, temperance, retention rates, and promotions, all would add immeasurably to the more traditional military biography.

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<sup>[1]</sup>David F. Long, *‘Mad Jack’ The Biography of Captain John Percival, USN, 1779–1862*, Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1993.

<sup>[2]</sup>John H. Schroeder, “Book Reviews,” *Journal of American History*, 81 (September 1994): 679-80.

<sup>[3]</sup>James C. Bradford, quoted in Ellis, xiii.



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