

James Lowry – edited by John Millyard, **Fiddlers and Whores: the Candid Memoirs of a Surgeon in Nelson's Fleet**. Chatham Publishing 2006. 192 pp. index, line illustrations ISBN 1-86176-288-2

A Naval Life: The Edited Diaries and Papers of Admiral John Locke Marx 1852-1939, ed. Mary Jones, Persona Press, Somerset (Distributed by Gazelle Book Services Limited, Hightown, White Cross Mills, South Road, LANCASHIRE LA1 4XS UK) January 2007. xiv & 281 pp. illustrations. ISBN 978-0-9553095-0-2, £15.99 pb

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What was life really like in the navies of Nelson and Victoria? What did officers leave out of their letters home and their published memoirs? James Lowry and John Marx went to sea at either end of the nineteenth century. The first, a young Irish medical student, used the Navy and the Napoleonic wars to make his way in an expensive profession, and saw a good deal of the Mediterranean in the process. The second, the great grandson of a German Jewish doctor, had a long and successful career that demonstrated just how easily immigrants were absorbed into the British elite.

The written remains of these two men repay study because they were never intended for publication. In contrast to the pious platitudes that usually pass for memoirs they record life in the round. Lacking the obvious professional interest in ships and seafaring Lowry spends most of his time recounting the delights of his various runs ashore, and his amorous adventures. Marx found relief from the demands of his career with the denizens of an altogether older trade, and left a clear reminder of the fact in his journal. He records how he and three fellow officers went ashore together. They all caught 'the clap from the same house at Cadiz.' (p.68) Like Gladstone Marx used a simple symbol to record morally suspect actions. He also described the infectious consequences with such accuracy that a modern doctor has been able to diagnose! In an age before penicillin Marx took a large number of mercury cures, and indulged in a good deal of sanctimonious remorse for sins he would commit again. Lowry never admits to catching a venereal complaint, but his fascination with the subject outstripped purely professional interest. On joining the Navy he was sent to the accommodation hulk *Bedford*, where he noted: 'We had on board 400 prostitutes and of course out of such a number many were

diseased.’ (p.31) He went on to observe venereal effects everywhere he went. One suspects he used the old line ‘trust me, I’m a doctor’ as his calling card at many a bordello – while the availability of a ‘cure’ made English surgeons very attractive friends.

Lowry lost his original journal in a shipwreck, so the version we have here was rewritten from memory and sent to his brother. He witnessed the tempestuous years that followed the Battle of the Nile, offering fascinating insights into the Neapolitan Jacobin Revolution, Nelson’s conduct in Naples, the successful British invasion of Egypt in 1801, a brief period as a French Prisoner of war, and the return of Nelson to the Mediterranean in 1803. Nelson scholars will be fascinated to learn that Francesco Caracciolo’s corpse was made to float upright by his fellow rebels. As a surgeon Lowry saw the horrific consequences of battle, terrible injuries, screaming men, and bloodstained decks, men transfixed by massive splinters and limbs crushed. Little wonder he took such delight in female company and polite society ashore, in Naples and Sicily. He came ashore in 1804, fully qualified in his profession, and richly endowed with salty yarns. He reminds us that Nelson’s fleet was crammed full of young men for whom fiddlers and whores were a source of constant delight.

Nor had tastes changed by the time John Marx began his naval life on board HMS *Britannia*, the floating cadet training hulk at Dartmouth, in 1866. He did well in his studies, but lacked the self-confidence to be a leader. He continued in the same vein for some time, a diffident lieutenant assailed with self doubt, despite the support of neighbour and family friend Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hornby. Hornby’s support kept his career moving along, until he hit his stride as a commander with his own ship. From this point on Marx showed himself to be a man of superior talent, resourceful, and confident. His actions on the African station were typical of the best of his generation. The combination of righteous zeal and effortless superiority that marked out the officers of Victoria’s Navy from all other men ensured he had no hesitation in acting against slavers, smugglers and other riff-raff. As editor, Dr. Mary Jones observes the transition from the largely independent Imperial cruisers of the Victorian navy to the tightly controlled Edwardian battle fleets did him few favours. Because he had little fleet experience he was retired as a captain in 1909 – a victim of John Fisher’s fleet concentration policy. However, the Royal Navy was not done with him.

When war broke out in 1914 Marx went to London and pestered the Admiralty until they gave him a job, as a captain in the Royal Naval Reserve – rather than his actual rank of Admiral of the Retired List. Commanding in armed yachts and decoy or ‘Q’ ships he played his part in the anti-submarine war – delighting in the independence of his command, the challenge of finding the enemy and the camaraderie of the wartime Navy. He didn’t sink a U-boat, but for years he was convinced he had. Only when the captain of the U-boat wrote to him did he accept that the damage inflicted had not been fatal!

Like many a naval man home from the sea Marx loved the countryside of his South Hampshire childhood. After the war, having retired for a second time, he took up fox hunting, unpaid civic duties, charitable concerns, farming and gardening with the same zeal and energy he had employed at sea. His last act was to build an air raid shelter, ready for the Second World War. He did not live to use it, dying in mid August 1939.

Editor Mary Jones has used Marx’s surviving diaries and letters to create a fresh and vivid picture of a Victorian sailor’s life. The reality of a service career combined constant anxiety about promotion and prospects ambitions with frequent runs ashore. Young officers ended up in the most insalubrious areas of many seaport towns, and like the men they led, frequently got more than they paid for. Venereal disease was an occupational hazard – and a good surgeon was a real friend. For all their professional ambitions they were human, and fallible. Marx was a good officer, he knew his business, but he lacked the killer instinct to make the highest grades.

The accidental survival of Lowry and Marx’s accounts has provided a powerful corrective to the usual naval memoirs, texts carefully edited to avoid offending maiden aunts, spouses or offspring. Naval officers did not live Spartan, monkish lives of absolute dedication, abjuring the sins of the flesh. Nelson’s infidelity was not the exception, it was the rule, Lowry was completely uninterested in the subject. When those old memoirs were written the Admirals filled them with endless tales of runs ashore to slaughter the local avian population. Perhaps they were resorting to an old trick – if Marx’s account is to be trusted the ‘birds’ they pursued were not of the feathered variety!

These two books provide a novel perspective on the great events of war and empire, appealing to anyone who has wondered just what naval officers did when they were not on duty.