THE SEA STORY IN AMERICAN WRITINGS

(IN BASIC ENGLISH)

By Kato Masao

As the greatest writers of the sea and seamen, Clark Russell has somewhere given four names; they are Herman Melville, Michael Scott, Dana and Captain Cupples. Of these four, Dana and Melville are Americans; and it is quite important that an Englishman like Clark Russell, who had himself good knowledge of the sea and seamen and who was, in addition, a great writer of the sea, has given Americans so high a position in this special field, the field where all the good names might most probably be taken away by the English, a great sea-going nation.

In order to be simple, American sea stories may be put into two chief groups: the one group is of those which are a true record of experiences at sea, and the other of those which, though based on such experiences, are still nothing more than works of fiction. The first group might be named the "fact sea story", and the second, the "fiction sea story". We will take up the fiction sea story first in this discussion because it came earlier than the other in its birth in the history of American writings.

It may be somewhat surprising that James Fenimore Cooper is noted for being the father of the sea fiction. The Pilot, which he made public in 1824, was earlier by some five years than the first sea fiction produced by Captain Marryat. It is true that more than fifty years before the time of Marryat and Cooper, Smollett had given in some of his stories with humour a detailed picture of the seamen's qualities, but what he had done there were no other than the pictures in which the chief points are overdone beyond the truth, and his stories, which give quite openly some of the writer's
experiences at sea as a medical man on board a ship of war, are not
good enough to be named sea fictions. About two years before
_The Pilot_ was made public, there came out in England a story named
_The Pirate_, but the name of its writer had not been given. It
became common knowledge later, however, that this was a work
of Sir Walter Scott; but even before this fact came to light,
Cooper kept to the view that it was the work of a man without any
experience of the sea, and he made a statement that he would put
a story into writing in order to make clear what a sea story was to
be like. _The Pilot_ was the outcome, and it was so well done that it
took away from Scott’s story the right of being the first sea fiction.

_The Pilot_ is a story about the great acts of John Paul Jones, that
noted American sailor who went about the sea while the Fight
was going on to put up a new order against the old in America
about the year 1778. It is full of views of bad weather and fighting,
and details of the changing conditions of the sea, with one
person in it, Long Tom Coffin, who is almost as good in being of
new sort as the most noted person in Cooper’s fiction, Natty
Bumppo, or Leather Stocking. Of his other sea stories some put
_The Red Rover_ as high as, or even higher than, _The Pilot_. Two
others are quite good enough; they are, _The Two Admirals_, which
has to do with the second Jacobite attack against the government
in 1745, and _Wing-and-Wing_, which has its stage in the Medi-
terranean Sea.

Those who are very sharp on the right use of sea words have got
quite a number of errors pointed out in Cooper’s stories, and ex-
perts have taken note of how Cooper frequently got wrong when
he put into his stories such materials as were outside his experience,
for example, the moving of a number of warships together in _The
Two Admirals_. But whatever the facts may be, it is Cooper, the
story writer, who gives great pleasure, because he has the power of
gripping the reader’s interest from the very time he gets moving
on one of his stories. Trent in his _American Literature_, has given
his opinion in short about what Cooper has done in the sea story:
"They are not only full of excellently, or at least well drawn sailors, and of exciting incidents and situations that prove the copiousness of his faculty of invention; they are also full of the charm and majesty of the sea and of the grace and speed of the ships that traverse it. In other words, with all their looseness of style and construction, they lift the story of adventure into the realms of poetry."

Indeed, Cooper's strong point is his power of giving details in a very clear way, but as for the men and women of good birth in his stories, specially women, they are quite dead as with Scott.

A short statement may be made here as to how Cooper got himself ready for the writing of his sea fictions. After he was sent away from Yale College, where he had gone as only a boy of thirteen, a decision was made to send him to sea in order to make better his bad behaviours, though these were made up only of his giving no attention to learning at the college and some foolish acts of no serious sort. After a year's experience as a common sailor in a trade ship, he went into the American sea-force in 1808. After three years Cooper got married and gave up his work there.

The writer of sea fiction of value who comes after Cooper had even less experience on the sea, and it may be of some surprise if I give the name of Edgar Allan Poe. Journeys by sea to and from England when quite young in company with Mr. and Mrs. Allan who had taken him as their son; some experiences in sailing pleasure-boats near Charleston when he was in the army; and possibly some short sea journeys in small vessels which went along the sea-side: these experiences made up all of Poe's knowledge of the sea. His Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym was produced probably while he was still in connection with the paper, Southern Literary Messenger. For this paper he had had a look into, and given his opinion about, M.F. Maury's Navigation, and he came into touch with J.N. Reynolds, whose writings in the Messenger were greatly responsible for sending out that noted South Sea Exploring Expedition with Wilkes as its head. Poe had done, in addition, reading of accounts of journey in the South Pacific, specially Benjamin Morell's Narrative of Four Voyages to the South
THE SEA STORY IN AMERICAN WRITINGS

Seas and Pacific, 1822–1832. This is now Poe came by chance to have a look to the sea for material in the writing of the only long story that came from his pen. It is true that he had not the first-hand knowledge and experience of the sea, and this was great loss, but he had the power to see in his mind and special powers of picturing strange persons in unnormal positions in the story. This made up for that loss. And in addition, he wisely kept from putting into his works too great a number of sea words and views requesting special knowledge for their right painting. His Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym gives an account of a most shocking journey by sea, and it is one of such books as we are unable to put down until we get to the last word in the story. The very strange ending of this story will keep long in our memory. There are two other short stories of the sea produced by Poe; one of them is The Manuscript Found in a Bottle, which got him a reward of $100 from the Baltimore Saturday Visitor, and the other is The Descent into the Maelstrom, which Poe put in the list of his eight best stories. They are, however, generally grouped as “tales of pseudo-science”.

The third writer in point of time is Herman Melville. In much of his work it is sometimes hard to come to a decision as to where fact comes to an end and fiction makes a start; specially in his first two books of the sea, Typee and Omoo, the pictures of sea experiences, of views, and of fight with natural men of the South Sea islands, are done in such a bright and clear way as to have frequently been taken as straightforward statement of fact. But however true to living are the persons in his books and however true to fact he is in picturing the sea, his stories are naturally fiction. There has been of late years a great comeback of interest in the works of Melville, specially in his greatest work, Moby Dick. Of this book John Masefield, the English verse-writer of the sea, has said,

"Melville seems to have spoken the secret of the sea, and to have drawn into his tale all the magic, all the madness, all the wild joy of many waters."
It would be, in fact, a very slow, not delicate reader unable to see the value of the book who in reading *Moby Dick* would not be moved by some of that strong desire which Captain Ahab puts out in running after that great animal of the sea. Only the story is uncommonly long, and in it Melville frequently gives details in great amount and makes attempts to be like Carlyle in way of writing. Without these points this story of great power and wide knowledge might be said that greatest of all the sea stories.

Before *Moby Dick* Melville got out some other works, of which the best are probably *Typee* and *White Jacket*. *Typee* is especially given words of approval for its beautiful picturing of the South Seas and the strange persons living there, though some will not give belief to it or *Omoo*, which came out shortly after it. The book, however, gave Melville the good name of being the first to put foot on these islands in the name of the empire of fiction. The experiences on which this story is based came Melville’s way after he and a friend had gone away from their ship in a harbour of the Marquessas Islands. He was on one of the islands for four months living among the men of that island in order to keep away from the cruel acting of those men on the ship. When only a boy he went to sea for the purpose of meeting his desire for the experience of danger, and he got the knowledge of the hard chance of a seaman on trade ships of some sorts. For a little more than a year he did work as a sailor in an American man-of-war named the *United States*. Out of this experience came *White Jacket*, of which we have to take special note, because the bad way of whipping done in the American sea-force about a hundred years back was caused by this book to come before the law. The book gave great help to making a new law putting an end to the punishment on the body in the sea-force, because while the measure was still under discussion a copy of *White Jacket* was put in front of every man of the American House of Representatives. Unhappy enough, however, after he got out *Moby Dick*, he got something wrong with his power of the mind and was no longer able to get another
THE SEA STORY IN AMERICAN WRITINGS

great work produced, and much of his later work makes uninteresting reading.

It is a strange fact that, with the slope down of the American sea trade about a hundred years back, there was equally getting less in amount the produce of the sea writings of fact and fiction. A great number of years came between the time of Cooper, Poe, and Melville and that of the writers of the late years who, at about the time of Spanish-American war and the coming up of the United States as a great power, made a start in turning again to the sea for material and impulse. Of these writers, the names of Morgan Robertson and Jack London have to be put together. They were like one another in getting blows at the hands of bad chance, and have much in common in their healthy, strong way of writing as well as in the red-blooded, hair-chested men whom they got pictured in their stories.

Robertson's father was in control of a trade ship on the Great Lakes, but it was his wish for his son to do work on land for a living. The young man, however, seems to have had the love of the sea and when he was sixteen years old he went away to sea. As a sailor he had experiences with all sorts of vessels. In the end he made his hope come true of becoming the second man in authority over a ship. For a time he was the chief man of a small pleasure-boat whose owner was a person with millions. At the same time he had frequently been in need of food, had narrowly got away from dangers without number, and had had shocking experiences which he was later to put into his stories. Of numbers of his stories, Spun Yarn, The Grain Ship, Sinful Peck, and Where Angels Fear to Tread may be given as the best.

Jack London went to sea like Robertson when sixteen or seventeen years old. His experience as a sailor was not so great as that of Robertson, but he did have those rough experiences of great danger among the fishermen of the North Pacific which were as interesting as those he had as a miner in the Klondyke, as a man out of work going from place to place for money in Canada
as well as in the United States, and as a newspaper man sending news from Japan and Mexico. When he had become noted as a writer, he made a sea-journey round the Pacific with Mrs. London in a small sailing vessel. His sea stories make up only small part of great amount of his writings; the best are The Sea Wolf, The Mutiny of the Elsinore, and the short stories in Tales of the South Seas. At the National Marine Exposition which took place in New York in 1920, a selection is said to have been made by the general public of the ten best books of the sea, and London’s Sea Wolf got the third place, the two others going before it being Stevenson’s Treasure Island and Dana’s Two Years Before the Mast.

Of other works of fiction having to do with the sea; those whose names I am now going to give will have a right at least to our short note as we go by. There is Caleb West, Master Diver by the able painter, light-house builder, and writer, Francis Hopkinson Smith. There is another named The Adventures of Captain Horn by Frank R. Stockton, but to-day this writer is kept in memory only by The Lady or the Tiger? Then one has to say something about Thomas Allibone Janvier’s In the Sargasso Sea, the story of a young sailor taken in the great masses of old ships damaged by the rough sea in that strange part of the Atlantic off the American sea-side. The experiences he had when he was by himself feeling in need of company are said to have been unequalled in writings after Robinson Crusoe. Winston Churchill’s Richard Carvel gives a very interesting picture of the qualities of the mind and heart of John Paul Jones about whom I have already written before. Churchill had been a young man learning at the Naval Academy at Annapolis, which is a part of the stage for his story. Henry Milner Rideout’s The Far Cry with its views not only on a ship but on a very warm South Sea island where the ship came to its destruction by the rough sea has very good picturing of the qualities of mind, and James B. Connolly’s groups of short stories like Out of Gloucester and The Crested Seas are very good stories of the deep sea fishermen of the North Atlantic.
THE SEA STORY IN AMERICAN WRITINGS

McFee may now be put down in the list of American writers, as he became American more than twenty years back. For seventeen years, he was an engineer on English trade vessels, and got a deep knowledge of living at sea which he has made use of as materials for his fictions, such as Casuufs of the Sea, Aliens, Command, and An Ocean Tramp. Numbers are of the opinion that Joseph Conrad’s idea and effect have been taken by McFee. In Conrad and McFee, there seems to be something of the same system of belief for art. In the first words to his books, A Personal Record and The Nigger of the Narcissus, Conrad has put down his idea of what it is right for a writer to do:

“All ambitions are lawful except those which climb upward on the miseries or credulities of mankind. . . . The sight of human affairs deserves admiration and pity. And he is not insensible who pays them the undemonstrative tribute of a sigh which is not a sob, and of a smile which is not a grin.”

That is the sort of ‘tribute’ that McFee has given to the Goodrich family in Casuufs of the Sea. Somewhere in that book he has said, “The world belongs to the enthusiast who keeps cool.” There is much of himself in that statement. If Conrad was a “romantic realist”, McFee was “a cool enthusiast with a benevolent marble heart.”

Turning now to what has been named the fact sea story, we will see that American writings have quite a number of works of this sort. Here Richard Henry Dana, Jr. is ruling as king. His Two Years Before the Mast goes before all the rest not only in point of time but in its high quality as a work of art. As with the sea fiction, the good name of coming earlier in time of the fact sea story has to be given again to America. Though Dana’s book did not come out until 1840, it was the first to give attention to the sailor’s living at sea as a true thing. It was true to the sailor, true to the ship, true to the great deep he went over in the ship. Dana’s book is a solid fact from first to last—not a bit more so because it is an amount of his experiences when at sea than because
of the high seamanlike mind, the quality of being without error, and the great-hearted, kind feeling that every page is full of. Before that on the stage and in fiction the seaman was too much a common quality fixed in form,—a jumping, widely smiling, drinking man ever giving stories, using strong language and walking with an important air.

Now Dana in his simple straight-forward story of his sea journey in the little sailing vessel round the Cape Horn to the land of western America took the first step in the destruction of this old strongly-fixed but false picture of the seaman’s true quality. The cold higher floor on the front part of the ship, the very cold rain and the strong whipping wind in the tops, the bad food, and the rough behaviour to the common sailors on the part of the chief man of the ship and the helpers by his side—these all are seen in Dana’s story together with the more pleasing bright sides of the sea journey. He was only nineteen when he got away from Harvard University near the end of his first year because of his feeble eyes caused by an attack of measles. He made on purpose a selection of the living of a common sailor without coming to the Far East for pleasure on an East Indiaman as had been designed before; and he came out of the experience getting much better in physical condition. He went back to Harvard and got his learning completed there, and then did work on law, and after that as a man of law had the chance of putting right the wrongs done to unhappy sailors,—the work which he had given his word to do years before when he was experiencing their hard living. Only four years after taking a degree at the college he put down in writing, from the day-book which he had kept on the sea journey, his Two Years Before the Mast, the sea story which is generally thought to be the best ever produced.

Of those who went in Dana’s steps, H.E. Hamblen, writing under the pen-name of Frederick Benton Williams, got out On Many Seas and The Life and Exploits of a Yankee Sailor, which is a sort of later-day Two Years Before the Mast and has been given
words of approval to which it had the right. But the writer who has, probably, come nearest to equalling Dana is Felix Riesenberg. His *Under Sail* got the seventh place in the *Ten Best Books of the Sea Contest* I have already said about. It is an account of a sea journey round the Horn to Honolulu and home again to New York in one of the last of the great trade sailing ships, in the year 1897. Riesenberg was a common sailor on this vessel, and his picturing of his ship's company and his detailed account of the living at sea in all sorts of weather are so well done that its writer, as far as American writings are concerned, is made second only to Dana in this form of sea story.

Of other books of this sort one has to keep in mind the strange story of humour by Captain Joshua Slocum, named *Sailing Alone Around the World*, Jack London's *Cruise of the Snark*, which is a record of his sea journey to the South Seas, and those pleasing stories by Ralph Paine in such books as *Lost Ships and Lonely Seas* and *Ships and Sailors of Old Salem*.

The group of the books last given might be named the sea story of peace; and there are still those stories whose views of the stage are put down in times of war. Books of this sort, however, chiefly being part of history of the American sea-force, may not be very interesting to the general reader, and for that reason they will be given here only by name. David Porter's *Journal of a Cruise of the Essex* is very well done and is full of interest from first to last. Arthur Sinclair's *Two Years on the Alabama* gives a first-hand account of the sailing journey of that noted Confederate attacker in the American War of 1861-5. Richard Pearson Hobson's *Sinking of the Merrimac* is an account of one of the greatest acts in the Spanish-American War in 1898; while Ralph Paine's *Fighting Fleets* and John Stanley Cameron's *Ten Months in a German Raider* are bright stories of the World War No. 1. There may be others in store for us coming, I may say, out of the World War No. 2, possibly in the making at this very moment somewhere in the North Atlantic.
In this way America has much to take credit for in her stories of the sea. It is a good name for her to have on her list the names not only of the first producer of the sea fiction but of the first writer of the fact sea story. While the English writings have such noted writers of the sea as Marryat, Michael Scott, Clark Russell, Bullen, Stevenson, and Joseph Conrad, the writings of America are able to give the names of Dana, Cooper, Melville, Robertson, London and William McFee.