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The Unknown Shore



Book Information

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Authors, A-Z > (O) > O'Brian, Patrick

Customer Reviews

In O'Brian's first novel of the sea, *The Golden Ocean*, which is factual in its essential details, Commodore Anson set out in 1740 to circumnavigate the globe. Of his small fleet, only Anson's flagship survives to return to England loaded with gold and silver taken from a Spanish galleon. (Spain has every right to take great pride in its role of financing the Royal Navy for the good part of a century.) One of the ships that began that fateful but historic voyage, the *Wager*, is driven by a fierce storm onto the rocky coast of Chile and wrecked. *The Unknown Shore* is the story of the travails of those who survived the disaster only to experience new tragedies, some of their own making, ashore. Only a few of those who made it ashore survive. Guided and otherwise given aid by natives, those few reach safety in Valparaiso, Chile. As in all of O'Brian's remarkably well-written stories, his narrative of *The Unknown Shore* is rich, delightful, flawless. His attention to detail!! is splendid, and splendidly set down. The central characters in this book are a midshipman named Jack Byron and a surgeon's mate named Tobias Barrow. Barrow is totally inept with any of the demands of survival in the rough, but Byron provides him with the inspiration to persevere. A fine story of depravation and wild adventure, told with O'Brian's top-notch craftsmanship. Jack Byron and Tobias Barrow are credible stand-ins for Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin, yet to come in O'Brian's much more famous Aubrey/Maturin sagas, fans of which will be delighted with this precursor to that 18-book series.

I am a longtime reader of O'Brian's work and sought this out after I had exhausted the Aubrey-Maturin series for the second time. This story is often said to be a progenitor of the series, but I beg to differ. The main characters bear some resemblance to the two heroes, but are wholly unlike when closely examined. This is a rich, detailed story at first, far funnier than many other of his novels. Midway through, though, he loses his thread (he often talks about sailors ashore being fools,

and this may be a case in point) and never fully regains it. The story wanders through detailed descriptions of suffering and death with a deus ex machina end seemingly borne of the mutual exhaustion of both author and reader. Tales of survival are well and good... inspiring, even, at times... but after a point it becomes an endurance test for even the most stalwart reader. In his later works, O'Brien learned that it was the characters and not the events that kept the reader enthralled. Sadly, this work wore on me: again and again the dismal tales of survival against all odds stacked up like cordwood until I was no longer interested. The language is lovely, but the clean, superb O'Brien style fades away in the late-middle. This is not unusual in novels; few carry their bold beginnings to the end. With O'Brien, though, I had hoped for more, even in his early work. There is some comfort that even such a master faltered at first, and that his later command of story, character and voice was learned (authors such as Saul Bellow are disturbing in their untiring published perfection, and I am cheered that one of my all-time favorites is capable of sometimes boring me.) I would say that this is a journeyman piece: beautifully researched, well-begun but ultimately not up to the standard that set you reading it in the first place.

It needs to be said, that *The Unknown Shore* is 99% based on the narration by John Byron (grandad to the poet) a midshipman of the *Wager*, who survived the wreck in desolate Patagonia and returned five years later to England. History describes Byron as "surviving great hardships". You have to read his account of the story to really understand the meaning of the word (well, from your comfy chair). So when some of the reviewers sort of complain about "oh, how much hardship can we take", I'd say, "Dude, that actually happened" Patrick O'Brien simply lifted the story, scene by scene, and in no edition of this book I have seen any recognition to Byron's narrative. The story is so compelling, that it is still in print. Do yourself a favor and read the original. Find it in as *The Loss of the Wager*. This edition adds even more fascination to the story, because of including a second account of the wreck, this time by the group that deserted Captain Cheap, and sailed back south, through the Magellan Strait once more.

The Unknown Shore is the story of Tobias and Jack, two unlikely companions who, after enlisting in the royal navy are subject to so many trials and tribulations at the end of the novel I was surprised that they survived with their sanity intact. The novel starts off mildly enough, but after they are castaway, things begin to go rapidly downhill. As if the gruesome descriptions of scurvy were not enough, the reader is treated to watching characters starve to death slowly, under the iron fist of a stupid, and selfish captain. Frankly, my greatest disappointment was that O'Brien did not show us

what happened to the cruel and heavy-handed captain Cheap, who deserved to be eaten by cannibals at the very least. Good, but not great, and not something I would want to read again.

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