



## Charles Austen: Prize Chaser and Prize Taker on the North American Station 1805-1808

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TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO THIS YEAR, Jane Austen's younger brother Charles arrived on the North American Station of the British Navy. For Charles, 1805 was an auspicious year. He was a keen young naval officer full of energy and promise. He would assume his own first command, meet his future wife Fanny soon after, and seize the opportunity of earning prize money. As an adventurous young man, there was at least the possibility that he might become richer from prize taking than he ever would on naval pay.

It is usually reported that Charles took only one prize and that it disappeared without a trace.<sup>1</sup> In fact, 13 prizes can be attributed to Charles, either as sole or joint captor between August 1805 and November 1808. In the course of his role of prize chaser and prize taker, Charles experienced thrills and risks, successes and failures. He knew the excitement of the chase as well as the fear of being chased. Although all but one of Charles's letters home from this period are lost, there is indirect evidence in Jane's letters that he reported regularly to the family about his experiences on the North American Station.<sup>2</sup> Presumably all information about prizes taken, monies earned, and other profits anticipated would have been of keen interest to his family at home. Moreover, for Jane, Charles was an important source of information about the navy,<sup>3</sup> and his narratives about the prize game may well have influenced her writing. When she came to write *Persuasion*, she created a hero, Frederick Wentworth, whose rise professionally and socially is partly predi-

cated on his successful captures at sea. Thus, on this, the bicentenary of Charles Austen's arrival in North American waters, it is both interesting and timely to investigate his prize-taking exploits.

By 1804, Charles had left the *Endymion* (24 guns), was promoted to commander and commissioned as captain of the new sloop of war *Indian* (18 guns) then building in Bermuda. Although his North American assignment did not seem to be a very exciting posting compared to the Napoleonic wars raging far away in Europe,<sup>4</sup> there was at least the potential for prize taking and personal profit. In the course of the squadron's dully repetitive duties of escorting convoys, seeking the recovery of deserters from British warships, cruising for trade protection, blockading American trade with Napoleonic Europe and patrolling trouble spots, naval vessels were constantly on the lookout for ships to take as prize. They would target enemy warships and merchant vessels as well as neutral craft carrying enemy trade goods, munitions or contraband to or from foreign ports. Once boarded and taken as prize, a captured vessel was directed either into Halifax, Nova Scotia, or into Bermuda. There the vice-admiralty court would condemn or release the vessel and/or its cargo. Condemned goods were sold by auction, after which the proceeds, less fees and costs, were distributed in proportional shares to the ship or ships party to the capture. Captains, like Charles, stood to gain a quarter share of the proceeds of a condemned prize.<sup>5</sup> So, there was adventure to be had and money to be made.

Entries from *Indian's* log books, Admiralty documents, vice-admiralty court records and the Royal Nova Scotia Gazette prove that Charles Austen was involved in the taking of various types and sizes of vessels: he accounted for five ships, four schooners, three brigs, and one French privateer. Among them were French, Spanish, Swedish and American vessels.<sup>6</sup> Some of these ventures were more exciting than others. Merchantmen were rarely armed and raised no resistance when taken; enemy vessels were prepared to fight and were thus more dangerous. Moreover, Charles's sloop *Indian* also risked the prospect of being captured herself rather than being the captor.

One tense encounter was the chase of the armed French privateer, *La Jeune Estelle* (4 guns). She was apprehended on 19 June 1808 en route from River St Mary (Florida) to the French colony of St. Domingue (St Domingo), laden with flour, beef and other provisions. After a one and a half hour pursuit, *Indian* "hove to, boarded and took possession of the [prize]." Charles "sent a lieutenant, master's mate and midshipman with 20 men to navigate her to Bermuda" where she subsequently arrived (*ADM 52/1868*). In the melee

of the pursuit and capture, *La Jeune Estelle* had one man killed and one wounded by *Indian's* chase guns. For Charles this was an important capture. He had put an enemy vessel permanently out of action. Moreover, in addition to his quarter share in the value of her hull and cargo at auction, there would be a share in the "head money" of five pounds paid for each of the twenty-five French men taken prisoner.

Charles was less fortunate with his next prize. On 21 November 1808, while cruising with *Vesta* (4 guns), *Indian* boarded and took a French schooner<sup>7</sup> laden with sugar and bound from Guadaloupe to Washington. Unfortunately, after brutal seas and heavy squalls separated the prize from her captor, she was never heard of again. The *Indian*, though suffering considerable damage to her sails and rigging, was able to limp into St. George's harbour, Bermuda. It was from there that Charles wrote first to Jane in early December and then to Cassandra confiding his fear that as "the little Frenchman" had not reached port, he surmised she was lost. What is striking is Charles's personal grief. He wrote: "what is a real misfortune is the [loss of the] lives of twelve of my men, two of them [midshipmen]" (Pierpont Morgan Library, 4500).

The risk of "real misfortune" also faced the prize chasers themselves. Charles had a shiveringly close call when, cruising alone, *Indian* was surrounded by four French frigates. For more than fifty harrowing hours, *Indian* used every tactic she could muster to escape her French pursuers. When she became becalmed on 6 May 1806 all hands manned the sweeps and rowed frantically. By four o'clock the decks were cleared for action; the crew "knocked down the cabbins & gunroom, bulkhead and the sail cabin between decks to augment the ships sailing and hove them all overboard" (*ADM* 52/3631). All the while "the frigates were coming very fast." On the third day of the ordeal the log tersely records: "all hands employed sweeping". Fortunately, for Charles and his men this feat of perseverance must have paid off as *Indian* "was enabled to push between [the frigates] and gain a safe distance before another breeze sprang up" (Marshall 74).

But chase and capture were only part of prize taking. There would be no pay out to the captain and men unless first, the vice-admiralty court ruled that the captured vessel and/or its cargo were "good and lawful prize" and secondly, a higher court did not subsequently overturn such judgements. Unfortunately the relevant legal records are often incomplete or no longer exist. Yet, it is possible to get some idea of how several of Charles's more interesting captures turned out.

Consider, for example, the American ship *Ocean*, taken jointly by frigates *Cambrian* (32 guns) and *Cleopatra* (32 guns) with the *Indian* on 1 September 1805. Although Judge Croke of the Halifax vice-admiralty court restored the vessel and some of the cargo to its owners (for instance, John Jacob Astor got his property back), a variety of goods, including luxury items, were condemned and valued for auction. Court records list a virtual Aladdin's cave of exotic things, including "snuff boxes, one small camera obscura, one landscape painting, quantities of gum arabic, sultanas, quick silver, nails, twenty pipes of gin, 1465 yards of lace, eight gold repeating watches, ninety silver watches, twenty two gold watches, 404 coffee mills, 2225 waffle irons" (RG8 IV/52). However, it was not until September 1810 that Charles and the *Indian* finally received their share of prize money. In the interim, Croke's original judgement was dragged to the Lords of Appeal in England, prize agents acting for the captains had caused further delays, and costs and fees had multiplied thus reducing the net profit. What must have initially looked like a very attractive prize ultimately generated a more modest receipt.

Another seemingly promising prize, the *Sally*, co-captured with Captain Edward Hawker, 12 July 1806, eventually disappointed. The Halifax vice-admiralty court had ruled in favour of the captors but this decision was taken on appeal in London in 1808. Court records show that the vessel and her cargo were then valued at three thousand nine hundred and sixty-eight pounds (NA: HCA 46/8). When the court ruled in favour of the appeal, the unhappy Hawker and Austen not only missed their shares in a quarter of almost four thousand pounds, they would also have been liable for legal and associated costs of the proceedings over the previous two years.

On the other hand the judicial business regarding *La Jeune Estelle* was promptly and satisfactorily executed. Records show that in September 1808, less than three months after her capture, her cargo was sold in Bermuda for £2,539-11-4. After the deduction of fees and other costs, the balance payable was £2,158-19-11 (HUL 23). Adding to this sum £125 head money, the final total would have been £2,283-19-12. Charles would have received £570-19-12 plus some additional sum when the vessel was eventually sold.<sup>8</sup> This was an attractive amount for at that time Charles, as captain, was earning an annual salary of about two hundred pounds.

What might Charles have expected to receive from his other prizes? Any estimate, even a rough one, is dependant on the results of the various adjudications, which are not all known. Of the Spanish schooners, it is on record that both *Rosalie* and her cargo of silk handkerchiefs, Persian ribbons,

earthenware, pepper, liqueurs, brandy, claret, tar and sugars were condemned and sold in Halifax. There too, part of the cargo of wine and hazelnuts carried by the Swedish ship *Dygden* was condemned and auctioned. *Neustra Senora del Carmen* was likewise condemned and subsequently sold in Bermuda, as was the Spanish schooner *Lustorina* and her cargo of coffee. As these latter two vessels were enemy property, Charles would unquestionably have benefited from their sales.<sup>9</sup>

Nova Scotia records show that Charles also received prize money from the captures *Rosalie*, *Ocean*, and *Dygden*. He was even fortuitously in Halifax when his prize agent Andrew Belcher advertised the availability of prize money for those with claims on *Rosalie* and *Ocean*. It is pleasing to note that Charles's Bermudian wife Fanny was with him in Halifax when *Ocean* paid out, and so they would have been able to enjoy this windfall together.

There were other personal benefits for Charles in prize taking besides prize money. Chasing and capturing prizes had the flavour of adventure: it entailed quick pursuit; it required strategy and luck; it meant taking gambles, some of which would pay off, some would not. Presumably for Charles and other colleagues on the station, many like him in the early stages of their careers, the exciting aspects of naval prize taking would have been catalytic to their morale and motivation. Moreover, the tactics of pursuit, the processes of the courts and the effectiveness of prize agents made for mutual interests shared by Charles and his fellow sea officers. In addition, *Indian* was Charles's first ship to command. His men had proved their metal when they were themselves the objects of pursuit. Such obvious evidence of teamwork on this and other occasions must have been highly satisfying for him. Certainly in later years Charles spoke most affectionately about his "dear old *Indian*".

On the other hand, these positive features need to be seen in the context of the attendant risks and disappointments. Prize taking was a sometimes expensive, sometimes fatal activity. If the proceedings dragged on through several courts, the captor would suffer his costs. This could be a sobering state of affairs, and one that Charles faced in the case of the *Sally*. Obviously, captors had to live to enjoy the fruits of their prize income. Though Charles's luck held, not all of his fellow officers were as fortunate. His co-captor of the *Rosalie*, Captain Robert Reilly drowned when his sloop of war *Busy* (18 guns) foundered in a winter gale and was lost with all hands in February 1806. Presumably Charles's prize crew on the "little Frenchmen" also perished while en route to Bermuda.

Additionally, *Indian's* logs record very many references to "strange sail sighted", "made chase and boarded" but there was no capture to be made.

Though monitoring shipping was one of Charles's principal naval tasks, there were days when the realities of the chase must have been disappointing and frustrating.

Charles Austen did not make a fortune from naval prize during his time on the North American Station. However, given *Indian's* size, his assigned cruising grounds and the chanciness of prize taking, he had a goodly number of captures and reasonable luck in the percentage of those captures which proved to be "good and lawful prize". In sum, Charles Austen's pursuit of naval prize was an active, intriguing and sometimes financially rewarding feature of the North American period of his naval career. Certainly there was material here for some informative, even gripping narratives to send home to Jane and the others!

#### NOTES

1. A typical way of referencing Charles's captures during this period is to cite only Jane's letter to Cassandra (24 January 1809) which mentions the "small prize" which never reached port. See, for example, Brian Southam, *Jane Austen and the Navy*, 130.

2. Given that virtually none of Jane's letters exist from September 1805 to mid-June 1808 (with the exception of one in 1806 and three in January/February 1807), what she actually knew and wrote about Charles's prize career remains largely unknown. However, if the extant letter of 24 January 1809 is taken as an example, it shows that information about prize taking was considered highly newsworthy and of concern to the family. Presumably the missing letters contained other details about the same subject.

3. According to Southam's recent article "the sailor brothers [that is Francis as well as Charles] were the members of [Jane's] family who contributed the most, directly and indirectly, to the novels. Their lives and experiences provided Jane Austen with the basis for her naval characters" (Southam 34).

4. Naval historian Julian Gwyn describes the North American squadron at this time as being "very much in a naval backwater. The war at sea was being determined elsewhere" (Gwyn 102).

5. Prior to June 1808, in addition to the captain's two eight share, the flag officer or admiral received one-eighth, one-eighth went to the master and lieutenants, another eighth to the warrant sea officers, another eighth to the inferior and petty officers, and the remaining quarter to the crew and the marines. See Southam, *Jane Austen and the Navy* 123 for the formula employed after June 1808. In the case of joint captures, the captain's share was divided among the participating captains.

6. Although Charles served for six and a half years on the North American Station, his prize taking took place during the first four years. The following is a list of the names of his prizes, their nationality, date of capture and the names of co-captors if applicable: 1805: *Dygden*, Swedish ship, 23 August, taken with *Cleopatra*; *Sally*, American brig, 24 August, probably taken with *Cleopatra*; *Ocean*, American ship, 1 September, taken with *Cambrian* and *Cleopatra*. 1806: *Rosalie*, Spanish schooner, 1 March, taken with *Busy*; *Lustorina*, Spanish schooner, 25 May; *Friends Adventure*, American brig, 1 June; *Sally*, American ship, 12 July, taken with *Tartar* and cutters, *Adonis*, *Bacchus* and *Cassandra*; *Neustra Senora del Carmen*, Spanish schooner, taken 25 July; 1807: *Baltic*, American ship, 10 January; *Joseph*, American brig, 22 March; *Eliza*, American ship, 19 April. 1808: *La Jeune Estelle*, French privateer schooner, 19 June; French schooner, November 21. In the *Royal Naval Biography* John Marshall reports that during Charles's cruises in *Indian*,

he captured “La Jeune Estelle . . . a Spanish letter of marque of similar force, and three merchant vessels” ( Marshall 74). This particular listing can be accounted for on the grounds that Charles would primarily feature his capture of enemy vessels. The Spanish letter of marque would have been either *Lustorina* or *Neustra Senora del Carmen*; the merchant vessels were most probably his solo captures of *Baltic*, *Joseph* and *Friends Adventure*.

7. This particular vessel is not named in *Indian’s* log book. The notes to Deirdre Le Faye’s edition of *Jane Austen’s Letters* incorrectly identifies this capture as *La Jeune Estelle*.

8. Charles’s prize money from *La Jeune Estelle* is calculated on the assumption that the court’s adjudication was completed before the new rules for distribution of prize money, issued in June 1808, came into effect in Bermuda. Had the case come under the revised rules Charles’s share would have been reduced to £380-13- 4.

9. Sources: For *Rosalie*, NAC: RG8 IV /62, and Royal Nova Scotia Gazette: 19 June 06; for *Dydden*, NAC: RG8/IV/49 and RNSG: 3 August 07; for *Neustra Senora del Carmen*, NA: HCA 49/48; for *Lustorina*, NA: HCA 49/48. The Bermuda vice-admiralty court’s judgement that the *Baltic* was “good and lawful prize” was upheld by the High Court of Appeal in England (NA: HCA 46/8). Of the remaining prizes, the vessel *Eliza* and most of her cargo was restored and the Bermuda court ordered further proof in the case of the brig *Friends Adventure* (NA: HCA 49/98). The brig *Sally*, captured 24 August 05, remains enigmatic. After the reference in *Indian’s* log, no other information is forthcoming.

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