



John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy

By Evan Thomas

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The *New York Times* bestseller from master biographer Evan Thomas brings to life the tumultuous story of the father of the American Navy.

John Paul Jones, at sea and in the heat of the battle, was the great American hero of the Age of Sail. He was to history what Patrick O'Brian's Jack Aubrey and C.S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower are to fiction. Ruthless, indomitable, clever; he vowed to sail, as he put it, "in harm's way." Evan Thomas's minute-by-minute re-creation of the bloodbath between Jones's *Bonhomme Richard* and the British man-of-war *Serapis* off the coast of England on an autumn night in 1779 is as gripping a sea battle as can be found in any novel.

Drawing on Jones's correspondence with some of the most significant figures of the American Revolution—John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson—Thomas's biography teaches us that it took fighters as well as thinkers, men driven by dreams of personal glory as well as high-minded principle, to break free of the past and start a new world. Jones's spirit was classically American.

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John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy By Evan Thomas Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Evan Thomas's *John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy* grounds itself on the facts of Jones's life and accomplishments to bolster his place among the pantheon of Revolutionary heroes while also working to deflate the myths that have circulated about his name. Jones, we learn, was confronted throughout his life with controversy and was crippled by ambition. But Thomas lauds Jones for early innovations as an American self-made man who rose from Scottish servitude.

Jones, despite his too brisk manner, was a true success, if not genius, as a naval captain. Early in the Revolutionary War, he captured a shipload of winter uniforms destined for General Burgoyne's army in Canada, which instead warmed General Washington's troops as they swept across the Delaware to defeat British at Princeton and Trenton. Later, Jones helped formulate the Navy's plan of psychological warfare on British citizens. And Jones's strategy to cut off the British fleet via the French Navy was arguably the most decisive strategic decision of the War.

In the end, Thomas makes a good case for a renewed appreciation for Jones's role in the broader revolution, citing his many connections to the Founding Fathers and his contributions to the broader war effort. While it may be that the John Paul Jones who proclaimed "I have not yet begun to fight" never existed, the real man behind the textbook legend is every bit as compelling a figure in Thomas's hands. This temperate biography situates Jones in what will likely prove durable fashion among portraits of Adams, Franklin, Washington, and Jefferson. --*Patrick O'Kelley*

From Publishers Weekly

This superlative biography from Newsweek assistant managing editor Thomas (Robert Kennedy, His Life) can hold its own on the shelf with Samuel Eliot Morison's Pulitzer Prize-winning Jones bio, *A Sailor's Story*. It does not add much to our knowledge of the events of its subject's life (from his birth in lowland Scotland in 1747 to his lonely death in revolutionary Paris in 1792), but it adds interpretations and dimensions to practically every event that has been recorded elsewhere. Jones's reception in the rebellious colonies, for example, where he arrived as a fugitive from justice, was much helped by his Masonic affiliations. His (frequently successful) pursuit of the ladies raised eyebrows, and his conduct during the famous ship to ship engagement between Bonhomme Richard and Serapis was more stubborn than sound. The British Captain Pearson was deservedly knighted for saving his valuable convoy from Jones's attack, and Captain Landais of the frigate Alliance may have mistaken his target in poor visibility when he fired some damaging broadsides into Jones's ship, rather than being treacherous or mad as tradition would have it. Jones was clearly prickly, socially ambitious, a difficult subordinate (he alienated every American diplomat in France except Benjamin Franklin) and a martinet as a superior. Jones was also a superb practical seaman (the survival of the frigate Ariel in a hurricane is only the most gripping example), a charismatic combat leader and a man with a vision of the American naval future. Both Jones and his latest biographer can justly be praised as masters of their respective crafts.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

The father of the American Navy proves to be an elusive character—both at sea, where he consistently

outmaneuvered British men-of-war, and in scholarship, where the legend of his life has overwhelmed the facts. The Jones revered today is, as Thomas explains, largely the creation of Theodore Roosevelt, who wanted a role model for the Navy's officer corps. In this reappraisal, Thomas presents the Scottish-born captain as a first-class entrepreneur of war but doesn't obscure the haphazard way in which Jones's naval victories unfolded, the constant wheedling for position that alienated his patrons, or his sexual escapades. The complex portrait is rendered with nautical precision—the author knows his topsail from his topgallant—and a lively eye for such details as the Enlightenment virtues espoused by Free-masonry or the proper way to kiss a French lady in the eighteenth century (on the neck, so as not to disturb her makeup). Copyright © 2005 *The New Yorker*

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