

The Chesapeake and the Shannon

This battle was fought for political reasons rather than purely naval ones. By August 19, 1812 (you guessed it, this was the War of 1812), the British had unexpectedly suffered a series of defeats at sea from an opponent who had been expected to be a pushover. British morale badly needed a victory, and Captain Broke of the "Shannon" thought he could provide one. He challenged the American Captain Lawrence of the "Chesapeake" to meet him in the seafaring equivalent of a duel or an Extreme Combat bout. Lawrence complied. The citizens of Boston, as the song correctly states, lined the shores to cheer their favourite on. The encounter was like a prizefight between two heavyweight boxers with great punching power and no finesse; the ships simply blazed away at each other at close quarters until one was too badly damaged to continue. The victor, by a narrow margin, happened to be the "Shannon."

The casualties were enormous on both sides. Dr. Helen Creighton, quoted in *Singing Our History*, relates that the people of Nova Scotia "seldom sang

Some of the awkward phrasing and rhyming in this broadside ballad suggests that it did not pass long through the mill of oral currency; still, it is a singable ditty which can tickle the fancy of Canadian nationalists while reminding us that the opposite of "Yankee" was not always "Canadian." Then as now, pro-war forces can be seen to trivialize the experience of victory. It is said that John Richardson, the first Canadian novelist, visited the damaged and bloody

[the song] or talked of this engagement because of the sights they had witnessed" when the two ships arrived in Halifax. As well, Nova Scotians, like the people of the American border states, had little enthusiasm for a war which ruined their trade with their best customers and seemed foolish and unnecessary to them. I would conjecture that this also played a part in their lack of enthusiasm for a song glorifying a bloody engagement in that war.

An excellent fictionalized account of the battle, appearing to be closely based on contemporary sources, is found in Patrick O'Brien's novel *The Fortune of War* (most bookstores carry the paperback version due to the current popularity of O'Brien's Aubrey/Maturin series).

The source for the song credited in *Singing Our History* is Mackenzie, *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*. Alan Mills recorded it on *Canada's Story in Song*, and no other recorded versions are noted in *Singing Our History* as of 1984. —JL

ships immediately after the battle and that the unpleasant sights influenced his gothic vision. Those who have read his *Wacousta* will recall a hyper-realism that is notably absent from this song. Of course, the romantic linking of the martial and erotic moods of the final verse would have been quite congenial to Richardson. —GWL

The ~~Ches-~~apeake so bold out of Bos-ton as we're told, Came to take the Brit-ish

frig-ate neat and han-dy O, And the peo-ple in the port all came out to see the sport, While their

bands all played up Yan-kee Doo-dle Dan-dy O!

The *Chesapeake* so bold, out of Boston as we're told,
Came to take the British frigate so neat and handy O,
And the people in the port all came out to see the sport
While their bands all played up "Yankee Doodle Dandy" O!

Before this action had begun, the Yankees made much fun,
Said, "We'll tow her up to Boston neat and handy O!
And after that we'll dine, treat our sweethearts all with wine,
And we'll dance a jig of 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' O."

Our British frigate's name that for the purpose came
To cool the Yankees' courage neat and handy O
Was the *Shannon*, Captain Broke, all his crew had hearts of oak
And in fighting were allowed to be the dandy O.

The fight had scarce begun when they flinched from their guns:
They thought that they had worked us neat and handy O;

But Broke he waved his sword, saying,
"Come, my boys, we'll board,
And we'll stop them playing 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' O."

When Britons heard this word, they all quickly sprang on board
And seized the Yankee's ensign neat and handy O.
Notwithstanding all their brags, the British raised their flags
On the Yankees' mizzen-peak to be the dandy O!

Here's to Broke and all his crew,
who with courage stout and true
Fought against the Yankee frigate neat and handy O.
O, may they ever prove both in fighting and in love
That the British tars will always be the dandy O!