

Storm and Conquest – The Battle for the Indian Ocean, 1809
by Stephen Taylor.
faber and faber 2007.

In Storm and Conquest, Stephen Taylor, author of the acclaimed The Caliban Shore, turns his attention to the role of India in the struggle between England and France during the Napoleonic Wars, and particularly the way in which the French repeatedly harried naval and merchant vessels travelling between England and the sub-continent.

Taylor conveys many things in his writing: the lifestyle of the East India Company employees in India itself, the rivalries, loves and hatreds between them, the role of the Royal Navy in protecting them and the ships which carried produce and goods both to and from them, and the tensions between the Company's officials and the naval officers on whom they grudgingly depended.

But the aspect of Storm and Conquest that makes it such a powerful, and inspiring read concerns not what occurred on terra firma, but on the tempestuous waves of the Indian, and other oceans. Taylor conveys, with chilling immediacy, the conditions aboard ship in normal circumstances, in time of conflict, and, most frightening of all, when the sea turned nasty and the weather threw its might against the ship.

Storm and Conquest is not just a history of incident, however, it is also replete with individuals: Rear Admiral Sir Edward Pellew and his great Company rival Sir George Barlow, the cruel martinet Captain Robert Corbet, his inspiring fellow Captain Josias Rowley and their French rivals Pierre Bouvet and Jacques Hamelin.

This is a beautifully written history, pacy and immensely readable, and a potent reminder that the British history we so easily take for granted could easily have been very different if not for the determination, bravery and pig-headedness of some extraordinary men.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh