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Portrait of a Naval Cadet,

Godwin Williams, ca 1850, Oil on board, 317.5 x 228.6mm
National Maritime Museum, London
BHC3125

Having both an unknown sitter and an obscure painter is like having a puzzle with important missing pieces, but one which is so much fun, I still want to see what I can do. I am an anthropologist and normally work with living peoples, trying to build up a picture of their daily lives and cultural behaviour. But this is an historic portrait, so I turned to some of the techniques I use when putting together exhibitions using things from museum storerooms. I think of objects as being the manifestation of ideas and the embodiment of a wide variety of relationships, as well as items of material culture with certain properties of their own.

Staff at the National Maritime Museum provided the information that the sitter was a naval cadet and dated his uniform to the period 1846-1856. So I started from this information. According to the current Royal Navy website, the term 'naval cadet' was officially 'endorsed' for the first time in 1843. About the same time, it was recognized that "personal patronage became no longer as essential for the would-be embryo officers". In 1849 the minimum age for a naval cadet was 12 (the same age Nelson 'went afloat' in 1770) and the maximum was 14.

In his portrait this cadet is standing on the foreshore, betwixt the land and sea. Perhaps he has just completed his training but not yet been assigned a ship – there are just vague outlines of sailing ships in the background. He has left home and in his uniform can't be mistaken for a 'landlubber', but he is not yet a sea-borne officer. This made me wonder what actual training a cadet of 1846-1856 might need or be expected to have attained before joining his ship. In other words, what had he experienced just before sitting for his portrait? This turned out to be a difficult question to answer, for cadet training was in transition during this period. In 1837 the Royal Naval College at Portsmouth had closed and for the next several years candidates went straight to sea and learned what they needed on the job from more experienced shipmates. An Admiralty circular of 1838 suggested the minimum requirements for a cadet: "He must be in good health, fit for service, and able to write English correctly from dictation, and be acquainted with the first four rules of arithmetic, reduction, and rule of three." (1)

A gunnery school on H.M.S. Excellent continued to be available at Portsmouth. In 1851 a further circular stated that prospective cadets had to be examined and receive a certificate of qualification, signed by the professor or mathematical master and approved by the captain of the Excellent. This paperwork, along with a medical certificate, had to be sent to the Admiralty before admission to the navy.

In 1854, during the Crimean War, the First Lord of the Admiralty had suggested that a training ship for seamen be established at Portsmouth. But H.M.S. Illustrious did not receive its first 'embryo-officers' until 1857, a year too late for our sitter. If he were a typical naval cadet of the period, he was at least 12 but not over 14, literate and numerate, and, as seems to be indicated by his portrait, in good health. He may not have had much formal training before being posted.

What sort of life might he have had when he did go to sea? If I were 'in the field' doing my research, I would be talking with people about their interpretations of their own lives, observing cultural practices and taking part in various activities. From all this I look for the commonalities which might be discerned in the individual life. However, there is no one today who has any direct experience of the life of a mid 19th century naval cadet. I therefore looked for a narrative account broadly contemporary with our sitter. *Naval Cadet: the journal of Edward Spencer Watson* records his daily life as a member of the H.M.S. Shannon Naval Brigade over a few months in 1858 as part of the British response to the 'Indian Mutiny'. Of course, Watson and his experiences during this exceptional expedition were unique to him. But we might read his journal for things which were part of most naval cadets' lives at the time and thus gain some understanding of our unknown sitter's future.

There are several such themes, which emerge from the pages of the journal. A strong love of the 'romance' of foreign places is evident, as well as a childish delight in the many experiences which were new to one so young. For example, Watson wrote in his journal that "the Nawab of Surrachabad's palace is a beautiful place and splendidly situated. It is being undermined by the sappers, and is to be blown up. He left a beautiful tiger and tigress in a large cage in his garden. There are also splendid groves of orange trees there, and we had great fun one day there, when a good many of us, including the captain, had ridden over, and we began pelting each other with oranges on horseback, and the captain got his share as well as the others." (2)

There are very few comments about his training, whatever it may have been, but

he did joke: "What humbugs those dirks are, they are all very well to walk about Portsmouth with, but are no use for real fighting." (3) He dutifully records the endless drilling, parading, and artillery practice which were usual naval routines, but he never expends much time in describing these mundane matters. Watson, who was only 4'5" tall and his fellow cadet, Lascelles, who was almost a foot taller, often slept at the house of the chaplain, presumably to protect their tender morals and keep them safe from the predations of their elders. I suspect this attitude surrounded many naval cadets without them being aware of it.

Watson and Lascelles were sometimes asked if they wanted a particular assignment, rather than just ordered to undertake it. Such consideration may have been extended to many cadets, who were the lowest ranking officers aboard or on shore. The actual duties for these two, however, did sometimes take them into the heat of battle, as they often acted as aides-de-camp to the Captain. When he was shot, they stayed with him, taking turns to nurse him. With youthful optimism, they were sure that he would recover. Their age and appearance may have made it easier to accept them in this 'female' role and for them to show tenderness to the wounded.

Occasionally the cadets seem to have acted as 'mascots'. Their antics, minor mishaps and misfortunes much amused the men and they were sometimes given special food or drink as 'treats' and well cared for if they fell ill. This must have been a not uncommon practice, given the age at which all cadets went to sea.

In other ways, the life of the naval cadet was a construction of strict masculinity, and his emotional life conformed to the character thought suitable for his gender and class, regardless of his age. Thus noted in the journal, but not discussed in detail and with no comment, are the flogging of a blue jacket for theft and many deaths from accidents, mysterious fevers and cholera. Enemy action was to kill many more, including Watson's captain, whose death he recorded as a dreadful loss. One's own achievements were not exalted but pride in those of others was called for; Watson was very chuffed when the Naval Brigade itself came in for praise from the Commander-in-Chief and several of the men were mentioned in despatches. Such attitudes would have been presented, in word or deed, as those all naval cadets should strive to emulate.

Watson was a dutiful son and regularly wrote his family, as did most cadets who weren't orphaned. His assurances about the food and the medic would undoubtedly be found in many such letters, as might his grumbles that the £5 'battle money'

he was given before disembarking was not going terribly far on land. Also common in cadets' letters were animated descriptions of foreign lands and 'exotic' customs. Watson wrote of watching men praying in river water up to their hips, and then showed off his growing knowledge of the wider world with an aside that the Ganges was sacred to the 'natives'. Oblivious to his own mortality and maternal anxieties, he told his mother about a sailor's death and burial. "It was a beautiful evening, the band in front playing the Dead March, and a company of men, with arms reversed, marching in the rear. We buried him in a beautiful looking place under some trees." (4)

Having read about a particular cadet's experiences, and tried to draw from them some, which might have been common to most naval cadets of the period, I turned again to the portrait of our unknown sitter. Is it a generic 'type' or a portrait of an individual? In some ways the artist has perhaps flattered the sitter - he has a lovely complexion, beautiful curls, and a full, sensual mouth. But also shown are 'bags' and faint shadows under his large and prominent eyes whose depiction suggests to me a real person, painted from life.

There are no clues about the sitter's identity, but on the back of the painting the artist has given his name – Godwin Williams. Rather unusually he also provided his address: 32 Andover Terrace, Cheltenham at Stoke, Plymouth. Perhaps the address was that of his studio and acted as an advertisement. But various period business directories of the area, including Stoke, do not list any artists at such a location. Indeed the name of Godwin Williams does not appear in the directories available on the Internet.

Did a boy or a very young man include the address after his name, hoping to add 'gravitas' to a work of which he was proud? In looking at the way the cadet is leaning on the boulder, it seemed to me that his stance and the composition were rather like those of early photographs where 'props' were needed to help the sitters stay still during a long exposure time. Could this painting have been copied from a studio photograph by someone who was neither a professional photographer nor a commercial artist?

Of course 'Godwin Williams' may have been how the painter was known to his family and friends, but not his full name, and he may not have been primarily a portrait painter. I did find a 'J. Godwin Williams', active in 1825, who was described as a marine painter from Portsmouth (5). What, if any, relationship existed between

this person and the painter of the naval cadet remains unknown. However, if I lived in Plymouth, I would peruse the churchyards, make contact with local historians and haunt the archives. I suspect that the identity of this painter could, with enough time, be established using these sources along with the UK census for 1851. Sometimes museum or gallery accession files, which show how a painting entered a collection, also suggest further avenues for research.

I haven't discovered the name of the unknown sitter nor more about the obscure painter. But having read briefly about the training of naval cadets, having found the wonderful journal of Edward S. Watson, and having stared long and hard at this portrait, I do feel I have come to 'know' him a bit. I love his slight smile and the self possessed but self conscious way he is presenting his sword and his hat with its badge, the emblems of his new status and rank, to the viewer. With his 'manly' stance, weight on one leg, he is at ease with himself and with the world at large, ready to go 'afloat' and meet his destiny.

Endnotes

- 1 Edward Phillips Statham, **Story of the "Britannia"**, London: Cassell, 1904
- 2 Edward Spencer Watson, **Naval cadet: the journal of Edward Spencer Watson**, London: London Stamp Exchange, 1988, p.79
- 3 Watson 1988, p.120
- 4 Watson 1988, p.119
- 5 Maurice H. Grant, **A Dictionary of British Landscape Painters from the 16th century to the early 20th century**, Leigh-on-Sea, 1952