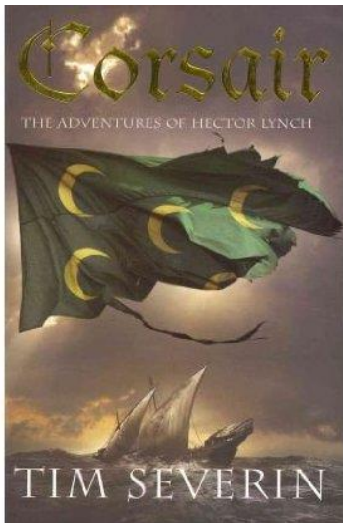


'Corsair: The Adventures of Hector Lynch'

By Tim Severin

Review by Jonathan Aird

There is no lack of historical fiction these days -- the last decade has seen a huge boom in this genre, and nowhere more so than the books that can be casually referred to as the "Sons of Sharpe" or military-themed historical fiction written by authors who generally have some idea of what they are talking about. It's true that whilst there has been a huge number of books published, they tend to fall into three eras for their choice of settings -- Ancient Rome, Medieval and the 19th Century. And these narrow periods of higher interest are even more exaggerated when it comes to stories set at sea or Hornblower, Ramage and Bolitho are Napoleonic captains, there is the occasional Armada-era story and, pirates aside, that's about it. So it was a pleasant surprise to come across "Corsair" which is not only a naval story set in the 17th Century but is also set in the Mediterranean -- specifically the North African coast -- and whilst it's about pirates, these are ones that hail from the Barbary Corsair ports. I was attracted immediately by the cover or I've long been fascinated by the last years of galley warfare, as the ancient vessel struggled to find a place in the world of the broadside sailing ship of war.



Our hero, though, is Hector Lynch a young Irishman captured on a slave raid by a wide ranging Barbary Corsair ship. Hector is unusual enough in himself -- he's from a well-off family, has a Spanish Catholic mother and an Irish Protestant father. This all works to his advantage, as he has education and language skills which work to make him a more useful and valuable slave. His constant motivation is to find out what has happened to his sister -- who was also captured in the same raid. In an Algerian baganio (slave quarters), he is befriended by Dan, a young Meskeet Indian who was captured sometime earlier from a Spanish ship. Together they plan their escape. I won't relate the whole plot, but the pair get to see the workings of a number of different galleys and sailing vessels as they try to make their way in the world, and this was quite enjoyable

, although Severin does make the mistake of shoe-horning just about all his research into the book, where an expanded historical note may have made a better home for some of the information in order to keep the narrative rolling along.

Now, although the cover is clearly trying to pitch this book at the masculine military market, the actual writing is in quite a relaxed flowing style -- which can make the book seem a little slow. Hector is, in every sense, a sailor on the seas of fate or he is tossed from one shipwrecked adventure to the next position of ill-luck and servitude as he is knocked around the Mediterranean in the hands of a variety of masters. Although this allows the author to comment on slavery amongst all the warring nations of the time, it does seem a little contrived at times. After one significant adventure, Hector apparently achieves some degree of control over his future or but even this is illusory as, puppet-like, his life continues to hang on the threads of fortune, as he is pulled this way by a chance meeting and that way by fickle storms. It is, perhaps, this feeling that Hector Lynch is so much drifting flotsam that leaves him still seeming a sketchy character by the end of the book.

With the wargamer's eye, there are a few small skirmishes and the occasional meeting of hostile ships -- but there's little that shouts out "get me to the gaming table!" Overall then, this is only a cautious recommendation -- there's hardly a glut of books covering the same ground, but this isn't the paciest book you'll come across. However, it is fairly entertaining nonetheless. It is the first of a series (aren't they all?), and I'd consider picking up a second-hand copy of the follow-on books to "Corsair" or "Buccaneer" and "Pirate."

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