C. S. Forester on Names of His Characters

[This interview was recorded on July 22, 1953, at Berkeley, California. The interviewee is Mr. C. S. Forester (indicated below by the initial F.). The interviewer is a member of the American Name Society (indicated below by the letter I). The original interview has been edited, and the final text has been checked by Mr. Forester for accuracy.]

I. Mr. Forester, how long have you been a writer of fiction?

F. Just over thirty years.

I. And how many novels, short stories, and plays would you say that you had written in that period?

F. I can count the plays—four. I can make a guess at the novels, just about thirty. But the short stories are beyond all counting, possibly two hundred, I wouldn't like to say.

I. I would make an estimate that in the average novel fifty characters have to be named and since some of these must have more than one name, that must make a total of about sixty names to the novel. Would you think that this was approximately correct?

F. I should think with some of my novels that's an overestimate, but with many of them it must be very near right.

I. After some calculation I would therefore conclude that you have got, somewhere, about eighteen hundred names for your novels, perhaps one hundred for your plays, and perhaps another thousand for your short stories—or to put it roughly about three thousand fictional names.

F. There must be some slight discount made for duplication; I can think of a few cases in which the same name has appeared in different books referring to a different character.

I. Even so, that shows that you have coined on extraordinary number of names, and we as members of the American Name Society would be interested to know how you arrived at them. In the first place I should like to ask you whether you have anything that can be called a general system for getting these names, or whether you had, at any time, such a system.

F. Yes, there is one obvious point, and that is that a conspicuous character frequently demands a conspicuous name, that will stay

in the mind of the reader, and similarly if a character does not want too much attention drawn to him, you may call him by an inconspicuous name. The rule is not perfectly true, because it may go by reverse; in order to lay stress on the fact that your conspicuous character is still an ordinary human being you may call him by a very ordinary name in order to accentuate his humanity.

I. That is very interesting. I would also like to know whether you have gone to any particular books to find names. I have heard, for instance, that certain writers have used the telephone directory or some college catalogue or have had a system at arriving at names. Have you done anything of this sort?

F. I am sorry to say I have tried the telephone directory, and completely unsuccessfully. You open a page and you find that every name on that page begins with I and it happens that at that moment you don't want somebody whose name begins with I, not for any special reason but just because of your taste. On the other hand, if you live in California and you want a Spanish name in a hurry, then the telephone directory is very useful indeed.

I. Have you ever actually coined names, that is, made up a name which you did not know existed and which you perhaps have even hoped did not exist?

F. I did it once with rather unexpected results, when I wrote a brutal novel which subsequently became a play and a film, called *Payment Deferred.* And searching around for a name for my principal character I decided to call him Marble; he was Mr. William Marble, his wife was Annie Marble, and it wasn't until several years later that I discovered that the current lawn tennis champion of the United States was Miss Alice Marble. I had never met the name in my own life before.

I. Are there any other particular names that you would like to tell us about, perhaps because you got them in some unusual way or perhaps you think they are good names for the purpose needed or anything of that sort?

F. I suppose I could talk about Hornblower, my character most people know about. In that particular case, I wanted a rather grotesque name, the man who intrinsically, despite his heroic life, is rather a grotesque character. Similarly, working on the principle of using a conspicuous name, it was a conspicuous name as well, and it was a name that the owner would likely to be selfconscious

about—and he was a selfconscious man. To add to the grotesquery of the name I called him Horatio, which of course was a name quite common in the period of which I was writing, but I could feel sympathetically towards him on that point having since baptism been cursed with the Christian name of Cecil myself.

I. I have sometimes wondered whether consciously or unconsciously you were not influenced in the choice of Horatio because of Horatio Nelson?

F. Not at all. As I say, the name was quite common at that time. I believe—I am speaking subject to correction, talking to an expert—that Horace Walpole was really named Horatio and himself abbreviated his name, and there were quite a number of Horatios at that time.

I. Have you used names as symbols of rank? For instance, I am thinking of Hornblower's two wives, who are named (the first one) Maria and (the second) Barbara. Maria is of lower middle-class origin, I should say, and Barbara is of the aristocracy. Did you feel a symbolical quality in those names?

F. I can hardly call it symbolic. I think you have stated the case exactly without bringing in the question of symbolism. Maria was by that time a lower-middle-class name, and at that time certainly Barbara was a name very much in the strict preserve of aristocracy. Barbara was an earl's daughter, and Maria was somebody of rather unknown origin, but certainly lower-middle-class.

I. Mr. Forester, you have also named a great many ships in your books. Would you tell us something about the way in which you have named your ships?

F. And now you are really asking me about a something which has caused me a good deal of trouble. There were so many ships in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars that it seemed almost to me, on occasion, that every possible name had already been used. I searched through the classical dictionary to find mythological names or names of people in classical history that hadn't been used. Extraordinary how difficult it was! In the last book I have written I have a ship called the *Atropos.* It was surprising to me that the Fates had never been used to make ship names, but it seems like it. But similarly, when I was thinking about a battleship, all the English county names had been used except for one, as far as I could make out. There was one county, Sutherland,

which at that time had never been used for a battleship name, and I seized on that eagerly. The various others of my ships have had to be called by disreputable characters because those names weren't used simply because they were disreputable. For instance, Caligula is an example of that; Pluto is another.

I. Names can be borne by a great many entities, aside from people and ships. Have you ever given fictional names to places, dogs, and various things of that sort?

F. Naturally, I have. Hornblower eventually ended up owning a country place called Smallbridge. I am not quite certain where Smallbridge is, but it's somewhere out by between Orpington and Edenbridge on the borders of Kent and Surrey, and I fancy that Smallbridge was named that way because of the indications of those other names. Incidentally it's not so easy to invent a name for a place that sounds reasonable. But Smallbridge had the advantage of once more sounding a little grotesque and consequently giving the flavor I desired to Hornblower's title of Lord Hornblower of Smallbridge.

I. Did you check to see whether Smallbridge actually existed in the English gazetteer?

F. I am afraid I wasn't careful enough for that. But I can quote an example of something that might have been very much worse on one occasion, when I wrote a book about a general, and I appropriated the name of a friend of mine in London, the actor Lewis Casson, who is now Sir Lewis Casson. And my general became Lieutenant General Casson, KCB. It wasn't until the book had been bought for publication as the serial, and the proofreaders checked through, that I discovered that there had been a Lieutenant General Casson, KCB, in the British Army at that time. The result that hurriedly all through the book the name had to be changed to Curzon.

I. You wrote a book, as I remember, called *The Captain from Connecticut,* and in that book you have a good many American characters, mostly from New England of the early nineteenth century. How did you come by names to use for them?

F. I think most of them came from what few New England newspapers I was able to see, or selections from those newspapers. The central character of Peabody, of course, has a name that is known throughout London as that of a New Englander who was a public

benefactor there, and I rather fancy that when I first planned the book that was the first New England name that I could be sure of at all.

I. How about your African names in *The Sky and the Forest?*

F. That was really difficult, of course, because in that case the names could not be too grotesque. In some cases, they had to be euphonious and it involved prolonged search through every source that I could find from Stanley's *Travels* onwards. The name of Loa, the hero, is—I suppose—the best example of a name that was not too grotesque, that was unusual, and which could be retained with ease in the mind of the reader.

I. You have spoken about the coincidence of the Marble name. Have you ever had kickbacks about names? Have readers written to you, asking about the significance of names, or protesting against the use of names or anything of that sort? Would you say that readers were much interested in names?

F. My only experience is that the interest is very small. I've heard from a good many Hornblowers in America, and very occasionally I've had people writing to me wondering whether I was discussing one of their ancestors when I've talked about a character as if he was a historical character. I had a nice packet of sweets once from a Mr. Caillard, who runs a chain of sweet shops in London because I'd written about a Frenchman called Caillard in *Hornblower.* He happened to be a villain, but Mr. Caillard was quite glad to claim him as an ancestor if it was possible.

I. Have you ever invented any names for any special purposes—a name had to be manufactured, one might say?

F. I called a Swedish character Braun on one occasion deliberately, in order to attract attention to his likeness to another character in the book whose name was Brown, but I think the best example is in a short story that I wrote called *Hornblower's Temptation* in which Hornblower encountered an Irish rebel named McCool. The Irish rebel was only called that in the end after a great deal of mental research because the original germ of the story dealt with a code transmission in which the code word, to put it a little inaccurately, was the name of the transmitter, and the letters in it those that could be used as words, like Bea or Sea or Eye, or for that matter 'Em or 'Ell. I had to write a code poem containing these words. As poetry it was beneath contempt, but it made it

necessary that my character was called B. I. McCool—being Irish I naturally named him Barry Ignatius, but fortunately I did not have to use his full name—the initials of his given names sufficed.

I. There was not then as far as you knew any actual name McCool?

F. Oh, yes, there was. I looked through the telephone directory on that occasion through all the names beginning with Mc.

I. Some writers have occasionally used names for sort of quiet humor, and have had, so to speak, little codes of their own. Have you ever played this kind of trick, or would you care to tell us about it if you had?

F. Well, I don't mind owning up to the fact that one character in the Hornblower series is a very pleasant unenterprising man called Bush, whereas my closest friend in Hollywood is Niven Busch, who while very pleasant and very delightful, has qualities of self-assertion, one might say, that were completely denied to my character.

I. Another phase of naming that we have not considered yet is in the question of title. You have had of course to give titles to all these novels and short stories and plays. Can you tell us anything about the matter of giving titles?

F. One thing which I think has significance is that if you think immediately of a title for a book or a story, that title is generally good and is generally accepted by everybody. If I myself have any doubts about a title, I find that everybody I come into contact with has doubts and generally comes forward with another suggestion. The suggestions are entirely in disagreement with each other. For instance the first Hornblower volume I called *The Happy Return,* and I was able to make that title stick in England, but my American publisher insisted on calling it *Beat to Quarters.* Similarly another novel of mine *The Earthly Paradise* was called *To the Indies* in America. And of course I suppose the chief example is an early novel of mine which I called by the rather grotesque title of *Brown on Resolution,* which has been twice made into a film, and has been called *Singlehanded,* has been called *Brown on Resolution,* has been called *A Sailor of the King,* has been called *Forever England,* and I can hardly believe that it has reached the end of its titles yet. And there's another novel of mine which I called *Death to the French* which another publisher in-

sisted on calling *Rifleman Dodd.* In that case I was inclined to agree with him, because I can remember publication day in London seeing a good many vans driving through the streets with advertising on them, posters which shouted out in large capitals *Death to the French.*

I. What do you consider your best or your favorite titles to your works?

F. I think *Payment Deferred* is the best title I've ever thought of. It's exactly appropriate, it's short, it's easily remembered, and although easily remembered, it's unobtrusive.

I. I think in what you have said there you have summed up most of the qualities of a good title. For the American Name Society I wish to thank you for your cooperation.

Those French Wine Names.—From a widely published American list of French wines we learn the pronunciation of their names. If you wish to order a bottle of Haut Sauternes just say *OH so tairn.* The names of Beaujolais and Chambertin are easily remembered: *Bow Joe lay* and *Sham bear tan;* likewise *Mawn Rah Shay* for Montrachet, and *Shot-oh Neff du Pop* for Chateauneuf du Pape. A little more difficult is *Prance Nwahr* for Prince Noir and *Poo yee Fweesay* for Pouilly Fuissé. A similar key to the names of German wines would be helpful: *Leap Frown Milgk* for Liebfrauenmilch, or *Dye des hyme air* for Deidesheimer, or *Bairn Cahs tell air Duct or* for Berncasteler Doktor.

The Two Iron Dukes.—Wellington owed his sobriquet to his tenacity in the Peninsula campaign and to the iron will with which he held his lines at Waterloo until the Prussians arrived. The third Duke of Sutherland earned the title "Iron Duke" by driving his own engine, on his own railroad, burning his own coal.