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BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR

OF

JOHN WESTLEY WRIGHT, Esq.

COMMANDER IN THE ROYAL NAVY.

"Gwr yn erhyn y byd."

THE general interest which the sufferings of this unfortunate gentleman have excited, was of itself a sufficiently imposing claim on us for the record of them in the Naval Chronicle; but we have hitherto been unable to obtain any authentic documents beyond those which were already before the public, and generally known; we are now, by the favour of a gentleman to whom the Naval Chronicle is still more especially indebted, enabled to present the following Memoir, drawn up from original papers, and affording, we believe, matter of exclusive information, and consequently an additional instance, among many, by which our Chronicle may fairly assume the character of a repository of original intelligence, alike eligible to the cursory curiosity of the general reader, and to the more serious reference of the future historian of the present times.

In adverting to the memory of Captain Wright, we are assured of the general sympathy of our readers. Who can recollect the manly fortitude he evinced when in the power of his obdurate enemy, without experiencing the most gratifying sense of British firmness? Who can reflect on his long series of sufferings, and, finally, untimely fate, without the most sincere detestation of revolutionary tyranny—of a dark and dastardly tyrant—the lustre of whose real character, contrasted with that of his noble victim, would be extinguished by the faintest of its beams. How much to be lamented is it, that the career of our gallant countryman was of so short duration; in which we see him briefly illustrious in the brilliancy of contest—then in the gloom of a prison—again free—and again zealously active in the interests of his country—then once more consigned to prison glooms—a more inveterate enemy—and a mysterious death!

Though late in the execution of our intended design, there is a

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seasonable coincidence in the publication of this memoir at the period when, by the recent and memorable victory at Waterloo, the conjunct tyrannical and unprincipled despotisms under which its respected and generally-lamented subject suffered, are reduced—we had almost said annihilated; but alas, if we are to form our judgment by *present* appearances, that desired result of a five-and-twenty years warfare is still but an object of hope! and we fear strong measures will yet be found necessary to effect it.

We are sorry to be precluded from giving a more ample account of Captain Wright's parentage and juvenile life, by the non-return of the sheet of standing biographical queries, framed on the suggestion of our correspondent PLUTARCH (N. C. vol. xxviii, p. 114.) which were transmitted by a friendly co-operator, to a branch of Captain Wright's family, to be filled up with the requisite answers; but which has not reached us in time for the press. However, we understand Captain W. was born at Corke, in Ireland, and was the son of a military officer, Capt. James Wright, paymaster of the 6th Royal Veteran Battalion, and that our hero, being originally destined for the commercial line, spent great part of his youth in Russia, qualifying himself for that walk of life; and where, we believe, he first obtained the notice of Sir William Sidney Smith.* Indeed, the history of the late Captain Wright's public services, is so connected with a great portion of that of Sir Sidney, that the detail of it will necessarily involve an occasional reference to many circumstances relative to that distinguished officer.

* Although the undoubted correct spelling of the family name to which Sir Sidney S. belongs, be SMYTHE, he being a collateral relative of the late Lord Chief Baron, Sir Sidney Stafford Smythe, and of SMYTHE Lord Viscount Strangford (all descendants of Customer Smythe, *temp.* Queen ELIZABETH); yet as that officer's official signature has ever been Smith, according to the *fac-simile* in the N. C. it seems more convenient and suitable to use this latter spelling throughout the present memoir for *him*: but as his brother, who was employed at Constantinople, to whom certain letters of Captain Wright's, given in this memoir, are addressed, spells his name with *y*, we shall adopt the former spelling for the incidental introduction of *Mr.* S.'s name.—A memoir and portrait of Sir Sidney Smith are given in Vol. iv. p. 445. It is intended to give a supplementary memoir of this officer, as soon as genuine materials for the same can be collected by the Biographer of the N. C.

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The eminent services of Sir Sidney Smith at Toulon, in the destruction of the arsenals, dock-yard, and shipping, had constituted a strong claim to the attention of the Admiralty, and he was subsequently, in the year 1794, appointed to command the Diamond, a new frigate, of 38 guns.*

In this ship Mr. Wright served as midshipman, and was attached to Sir Sidney as his secretary, which ultimately produced between them a sincere and ardent friendship. Although the various exploits of the Diamond, in which Mr. Wright took a part, are written in the chronicles of that war, there is one not less deserving of celebrity, which has been mentioned in the world only in an incidental cursory way, and never authentically described; and that is, the *reconnoissance* of Brest † harbour. We are extremely glad, therefore, to be enabled to gratify our readers with her gallant captain's own report of that delicate service:—

"SIR, "*Diamond, at Sea, 4th January*, 1795.

"In pursuance of your orders, I this morning looked into the port of Brest in this ship, in order to verify the intelligence of the enemy's fleet being at sea.

"I went round the W. point of Ushant yesterday, and the wind being easterly, I was obliged to work to windward between the shoals off point St. Matthew and the rocks to the S.-ward, in order to come near enough to look into the road. We observed a large ship under French colours working in a-head. She took no notice of us, probably supposing that we were of her own nation, from our making so free with the coast. I hoisted French colours, having previously disguised the figure of the ship, in order to favour such a deception. The tide of ebb coming strong out of the harbour, the enemy's ship anchored; and I accordingly anchored astern of her at sun-set: I was in hopes, that when the flood made again, she would have weighed, and have proceeded up the passage, that we might have done the same, without approaching her so near as to risk detection, and the consequent frustration of our object; but she continued to lye fast: and I was obliged either to relinquish the going close enough to the harbour to make my observations, or to alarm the coast by attacking her, or else to pass her silently, and thereby leave her in the channel of my retreat. I considered the occasion of my being detached from the squadron as an object of sufficient national importance to justify all risks, and accordingly weighed and passed her sufficiently near to observe, by the light of the moon, that she was a line-of battle ship. As we proceeded, we saw two other ships at anchor, one of which was evidently a frigate:

* *Vide* N.C. Vol. iv. p. 453.

† Chart of Brest, N. C. Vol. i. p. 144, iv. p. 485.

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not being satisfied that I should, from my then position, be able to discern the anchorage plainly when the day broke, I was obliged to go between those ships and the Toulinguet rocks, observing the precaution, in passing, to give all orders in a low tone of voice, that the enemy might not hear us speak English. They took no notice of us; and by day-light this morning I had attained a position from whence I could discern the usual anchorage of Brest sufficiently distinct to ascertain that there are no men of war in the road (the basin is not discoverable from without the forts). I observed the wreck of a large ship * on *Mingan* rock. It now became necessary to make the best of my way out of the passage. Accordingly I altered my course for that purpose, taking a direction to repass the line-of-battle ship. A *corvette* which was steering out in a parallel direction to us, was the first who took the alarm at this change of movement. She brought-to, making signals which communicated the alarm to the other two ships; these both hoisted their top-sail-yards immediately, and began getting under sail: my situation now became critical. I saw by the course the line-of-battle ship had taken to cut me off in my passage between her and the rocks, that I could not effectuate it; and there seemed to remain no alternative, but to remove their alarm by a conduct that should bespeak ourselves unconcerned. Therefore repeating such of the signals as I could, I steered down directly within hail of this ship, which lay in my way between *Basse-Buzec*, and the *Trépieds*. I could by this time perceive she was a disabled ship, with jury-masts, pumping from leaks, and that some of her upper-deck ports were without their guns. To avoid being questioned in any embarrassing way, I began the conversation in French with the captain, who was in the stern-gallery, accounting for my change of course, by saying I observed his disabled state, and came down to him to learn if I could render any assistance. He answered, thanking me for the offer, saying he had men enough; which indeed I could plainly perceive, as they were crowded on the gun-wale and quarter. Looking at this ship, I could not but form speculations from her crippled state, that I should be able to preserve my position under her stern, so as to rake her repeatedly; thus beginning an action with such advantage as would be sufficient to ensure us a favourable issue: my guns were ready pointed; but I then reflected that it was worse than useless to fire, since I could not hope to secure the prize, and carry her off from the two other ships; and as the execution of the service I was sent upon might be rendered abortive by the unfavourable result of so unequal a contest as fighting all three together in a frigate, the utmost that I then could do would be to give her a most destructive raking fire, and sail away: this my men were ready and eager for; but I over-ruled the idea:—considering the shocking carnage from our double-loaded guns enfilading a crouded ship, within half-pistol shot; and considering it unmanly, as well as treacherous, to make such wanton havoc while speaking in friendly terms, and proffering assistance. I believed that my country would readily relinquish a trifling degree of benefit to be pur-

* This was subsequently known to be a 3-decker, belonging to the fleet that had sailed; for *Mingan* rock see plan of Brest, in N. C. Vol. iv. p. 485.

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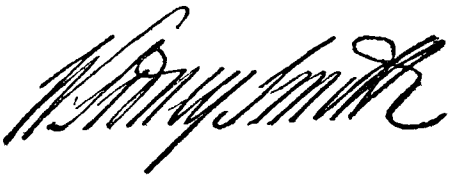
chased at the expense of humanity and of national character; and I hope that for these reasons I shall stand justified in not having made use of the accidental advantage in my power for the moment. We parted, after some conversation, with mutual compliments; the French captain telling me his ship's name was *Le-Caton*; and I, in answer to his *quære*, named mine as one of the Norway squadron, which it was not likely he would know by sight. The other ships, seeing that we were spoken by the *Caton*, discontinued the pursuit, and we passed the rocks unmolested.

I am, &c.



Captain Sir J. B. Warren, &c.

The enterprising spirit of Sir Sidney Smith had been successfully exerted against the enemy, until the 18th of April, 1796, when having, on a reconnoitering expedition off Havre de Grace, captured the Vengeur French lugger privateer, with the boats of his little squadron, he was driven, by a strong set of the tide, above the forts. After passing the night in this unfortunate situation, the position of Sir Sidney and his prize was discovered by the enemy in the morning; the alarm was given, and he was attacked by such a superiority of force, that resistance was found utterly unavailable, and he was compelled to surrender himself and his company, among whom was Mr. Wright, prisoners of war.*

Their treatment at Havre was consistent with their situation, and with an assurance from the governor to the officers on board the Diamond, that his prisoners should be treated with all the kindness their condition could admit of. On the same day they were sent to Rouen, escorted by 4 gens-d'armes and M. Baute, whom Mr. Wright has mentioned as an attentive gentlemanly man.

They reached Rouen the next day. Here they experienced a sad reverse of treatment, being used more like malefactors than prisoners of war. They were conducted to the prison of Saint Lo, and from the concierge received much kindness and polite attention, but which was totally contrasted by the insolent behaviour of the commissary there. They were, however, in a state of progression—it might be from bad treatment to better, and there was hope to console them.

* *Vide* N. C. Vol. XVIII. page 196.

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On the 21st Sir Sidney and Mr. Wright left Rouen, under similar escort, accompanied by two aids-de-camp of General Huet, of good-humoured disposition and decent behaviour, and arrived at Paris the 22d. Having breakfasted, they were conducted to General Hatry's—who was puzzled to know what to do with the *English Monsters*—an appellation, in Paris, sufficiently ominous. Their treatment, hitherto, might have been the mere result of personal humour or disposition—they had now sufficient reason to believe it officially authorised.

Letters of consultation immediately took place between the general and M. Petiet, minister of war, which ended in their being conducted by General Chenier and a legion of dragoons to the military prison of the Abbaye, where Mr. Wright, and his captain, were confined in separate cells, under the scandalous regime called *Secret*. Here Mr. Wright was allowed no intercourse with any human being except a gen-d'arme (by whom he was *gardé à vue*) and the concierge, whose behaviour rendered it not very desirable. He was thus guarded, and occasionally questioned with all the strictness and severity of the Inquisition—he was not allowed a razor; nor, except at meals, a knife. Permission, after some time, was obtained, that a barber might shave him, under the ludicrous exhibition of a *chef de battalion*, and a file of mousqetaires, superintending the operation. In consequence, however, of an application to the minister of war, an intercourse with Sir Sidney, of two hours a day, and the use of razors, were, by indulgence, granted. On the 3d of July, our two captives were removed to the Tower of the Temple.*

Such was the unfortunate consequence of this daring enterprise, from which three questions naturally arise, which are thus stated and considered by Mr. Wright:—

1st. "Ought a commander of a squadron to risk his own person on detached service?

2d. "Was the capture of the Vengeur lugger an object of sufficient magnitude to authorise the attack in her own port?

* In the tower of this prison are detained those who are accused of high treason. The buildings which filled its enclosure have been in part demolished, and some streets have been opened which communicate with those of *La Corderie*.

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3d. "Did the circumstances of her situation, wind, weather, and tides, afford a reasonable prospect of success in the attack?

"As to the first. It is answered, that, in a squadron on service of peculiar activity and hazard, wherein much more is expected both of officers and men, this is usually required in the ordinary routine of cruising service; it is not only allowable, but it is the duty of a commander to be himself foremost, wherever his presence may appear to be most necessary at the time; and to command by example; as well to inspire emulation and confidence, as to silence those (some of whom are to be found in every body of men) who hold language tending to discourage enterprise, by magnifying the danger, and diminishing the value of the object pursued: for it is impossible to answer such by argument, without entering into a debate that would be subversive of subordination, and that prompt obedience, which form the very essence of the naval strength of the country. A lieutenant might perhaps have been detached on this particular occasion, had there been one on board fit for duty; but the first lieutenant was gone home from Herqui with despatches, the second lieutenant was sick, the third lieutenant had been ill, and kept watch from the necessity of the case, though unequal to any great exertion; the acting lieutenant, though equal in courage to any service, was considered too young to command; the master, an excellent pilot, was better left in charge of the ship, than detached.

"The squadron being extended along the coast from Jersey to Havre, the Diamond *was alone* on this eastern point of the station, having directed her course thither for the express purpose of intercepting privateers, of whose depredations information had been received, both from the shore and from the Admiralty officially.

"As to the second question.—This capture was of the more consequence, as the squadron had so effectually blockaded the enemy's ports within the limits of the station for the year past, that no capture had been made by the enemy in the channel during that time, till those recently announced; which had given our coasting trade such a degree of confidence, that they frequently ventured without convoy. The Vengeur had been the most successful cruiser during the preceding week: this had been learnt by the recapture of one of her prizes, whose prize-master represented her captain as very enterprising, and well acquainted with

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the English coast. She had narrowly escaped the Syren, who had chased her into Isigny river: at that time her light draught of water, and superior sailing, proved it to be impossible she could ever be captured, otherwise than by being boarded during a calm, by boats. She was discovered at an anchor in the inner road of Havre, evidently ready to start on a fresh cruise. The Diamond having been near four months at sea, her provisions and water were so much reduced, that she was unable to remain off the port to watch the Vengeur, and there was no lugger in the squadron to perform this service. Add to this, a rendezvous was given for all the ships to meet off Cape Barfleur three days afterwards, for a particular indispensable service; two of the squadron being gone to Portsmouth, to bring over the necessary supplies to that rendezvous; so that every thing prompted the necessity of not leaving this active enemy's cruiser at liberty to come out and commit new depredations, during the forced absence of the squadron from the eastern extremity of the station, and in short, of cutting her out at once, if possible. This leads to the

"Third question; as to the prospect of success.—The boarding a vessel of force in boats, is reckoned so hazardous by many naval officers as not to be attempted. The attacking party are necessarily obliged to row up under her fire, and must expect to meet a vigorous resistance from a greater number of men than they can bring to one point, who have at the same time the advantage of standing a few feet more elevated than the men in the boats: it is therefore advisable to choose a moment when she does not expect an attack, and to approach within at least musket-shot unseen, before the alarm occasions her fire to open. This moment offered, with every circumstance that could be wished. The security the lugger's people could not but feel, lying under the protection of several batteries, rendered it probable they would be unprepared, thinking an attack unlikely. The calmness of the weather was favourable to the approach of boats, and the moon being obscured by clouds, afforded a degree of light suitable to such an enterprise. The little air of wind there was being from the sea, occasioned the lugger to be windward of any thing that might come out from Havre Pier: it was necessary, however, to wait till the ebb was done, against which the boats could not pull to where she lay. A person not acquainted with the peculiarity of the

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Havre tides, will naturally ask—Why not go in with the last of the flood, and come out with the first of the ebb, taking the slack water for the operation of boarding?—To obtain a conclusive answer to this question, it is sufficient to consult the *Petit Neptune* where the peculiarity of these tides is remarked and accounted for. The first of the ebb coming down the Seine, meets the channel flood and stops, making three hours slack water and full tide at Havre Pier and in the Basin: the first drain of the ebb-tide in the inner road, partakes of the direction of the flood still running with rapidity in the Channel, so that the muddy waters of the Seine are carried up to, and round Cape La Heve; in which case the lugger being cut from her anchors at the first of the ebb, in little wind, must have drifted under the new battery of Cape La Heve, and very slowly passed it; whereas the first of the flood setting southward to fill Toque and Dive rivers, and partaking of the direction of the Channel ebb, would carry her directly from all the batteries of Havre, when once clear of the pier tide. This moment was therefore chosen, and likewise because the two gun-boats, which had been ordered to follow the Diamond, and keep close in-shore, were likely to be by that time off Dive. Every part of this calculation answered, except that of the arrival of the gun-boats, whose protection was looked for: One untoward circumstance happened, which was, the cable being cut by the enemy during the contest, before the boats were a-head to tow, or the sails set to catch the light air of wind from sea; consequently the vessel remained longer in the partial tide setting round the pier head, than would have been the case had she been got under weigh properly, and this occasioned her to drift to leeward of the pier. It is evident she must otherwise have been so far to windward of the pier in her stretch off, as to keep the weather-gage of whatever might come out of Havre on the alarm of the firing, at an equal distance to that she was to windward of at getting under weigh, which would have rendered her being cut off impossible. As it was, the capture was made without loss, the prize was brought from under the guns of Havre, without molestation, and anchored on the Harfleur shore; after which Sir Sidney put off to return to the Diamond in his boat, and had made

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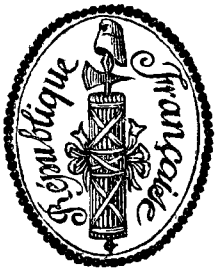
considerable way, when the enemy's vessels came out of Havre: he then returned on board the lugger, determined to defend her if possible till the north-east tide made. The boat in which he returned escaped afterwards, as did the launch; so that if he could have considered his personal safety alone, and have deserted those whom it was his duty to encourage by his example and presence to such a degree of resistance as might extricate the whole party, he might have got safe off: but after the first shot, flight is out of the question for any man of honour, and particularly a commanding officer. The defence was prolonged while there was the smallest hope of extrication, and if there had been more wind, the lugger would have been brought out, having beat off the first assailants."

The following series of original letters, which have been kindly communicated to us by a friend of the deceased hero of this history, will afford a lively picture of the relative anxiety and injustice suffered and imposed by these unfortunate gentlemen and their implacable and malignant enemy, contrasted with the gratifying instances of private respect and friendship.

The first is, we believe, an answer to Mr. Wright's initiatory letter of remonstrance, which he had addressed to the minister of marine as a British naval officer and prisoner of war; but it appears his prison might have intimated the character which as a prisoner he bore in the eyes of the Directory:—

Bureau de Secretariat.

Liberte.  *Egalité.*

Paris, le 23 Thermidor, an 5 de la République française, une et indivisible.

Le Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies, à Monsieur Wright.

Je reçois, Monsieur, la lettre que vous m'avez fait l'honneur de m'écrire. Je dois vous prévenir que le ministre de l'intérieure se trouvant chargé de tout cequi a trait à l'administration de la Tour du Temple, c'est a lui a qui

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