



## *The Sailor's Homer: The Life and Times of Richard McKenna, Author of The Sand Pebbles* by Dennis Noble.

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Richard McKenna was a most ordinary man for most of his life. He enlisted in the US Navy in 1931 at age eighteen and became a “lifer,” retiring twenty-two years later. Though he traveled to many places in that time, his naval career was pedestrian, spent mostly on noncombatant ships; the troopship he served on during World War II saw little combat. McKenna won no medals for bravery and ended his career as a chief machinist’s mate, a common terminal rank for a long-service man.

What sets McKenna apart from other ordinary men is his 1962 bestselling novel *The Sand Pebbles*, later adapted as a successful Hollywood film (dir. Robert Wise, 1966) starring Steve McQueen. What particularly distinguishes the book and the film is that they reflect the background of a career sailor, not a young man who, like Ernest Hemingway, spent a few adventurous years in the military before gaining great fame as a writer. Veterans who write about the military tend to come primarily from the officer ranks.

McKenna worked in the public affairs office at Great Lakes Naval Station near the end of his active-duty career, writing boilerplate pieces to suit the Navy’s needs. He did not attend college until he retired in his early forties. The presence of a middle-aged retired chief machinist’s mate in classes at the University of North Carolina was unusual even for a generation far more used to former GIs attending college than today’s undergraduates. He wrote all his creative works between 1953 and his death at age fifty-one in 1965. Besides Alex Haley, it is hard to name a writer of similar background who won such literary acclaim.

Dennis Noble resembles McKenna in having attended college (PhD, Purdue) after retiring from the US Coast Guard as a senior chief petty officer. This may help explain his preoccupation with the story of another career enlisted man. Though he is, then, an empathetic biographer, Noble did not have an easy task in chronicling McKenna’s life, career, and literary inspirations. Since McKenna died young, just as he began to enjoy commercial and critical success, his creative publications are few in number—*The Sand Pebbles*; another, unfinished novel; and a handful of short stories. Moreover, his life as an itinerant sailor does not furnish abundant material for a detailed biography. In short, Noble has done yeoman’s work (pun intended) in lifting the veil from an obscure figure who died before he could produce a body of material that would flesh out a substantive biography.

Noble did have access to about “two hundred” pounds of personal material, including letters sent and received by McKenna and a couple scrapbooks. He also succeeded in gaining access to McKenna’s service record (thanks to the intervention of a US congressman) and, in the US National Archives, the logs of the ships he served on. The resulting slim volume sums up McKenna’s life from soup to nuts. (An appendix containing one of his short stories adds little to the main text.)

Relying on his modest primary source base, Noble asks how an introspective, bookish, solitary, distinctly blue-collar sailor became a bestselling author. A man of McKenna’s qualities would seem to be at odds with the shortsighted, brawling, hard-drinking sailors of the old peacetime Navy. But Noble argues that “Mac” was both common sailor and a rare human being, a Navy lifer and an intellectual

who, unlike his peers, haunted secondhand book stores and spent his leaves traveling in Guam, the Philippines, China, and Japan.

Parts of the book seem padded and concern matters extraneous to the life and times of its subject, for example, the exhaustive background detail for all the ships McKenna served on, including their places of construction and operational histories (20, 122–129). Noble does the same thing with people: he mentions that one of McKenna's commanding officers, Charles McVay, later commanded the ill-fated *Indianapolis*. Well and good. But he then digresses into the *Indianapolis*'s mission to deliver atomic bomb parts, its sinking, and the horrors that followed, and even McVay's postwar career, all of which had nothing to do with McKenna. The Bonin Islands get five pages (51–55), even though McKenna neither visited nor wrote about them. He was merely interested in reading Oliver Hazard Perry's report on them.

Noble's knowledge of the US Navy is sometimes uncertain. For example, he misleads the reader by stating that his promotion to fireman first class made McKenna a petty officer (46).<sup>1</sup> Noble believes McKenna was a stellar sailor compared to his contemporaries, often achieving 4.0 (perfect) evaluations. But he fails to note that, as in many other bureaucracies, those most invested in the Navy were the most leniently evaluated. In other words, the higher the rank, the higher the marks. Thus, there is no way to know (and Noble has not tried to learn) whether McKenna was a paragon among chief petty officers. After all, when he applied for warrant officer in 1942, the selection board turned him down, even as the Navy was expanding exponentially in a time of war. Noble says McKenna was disqualified for myopia and for contracting syphilis some years before, when venereal disease was seen as a serious moral failure by the Navy. But he omits to say (or cite others who say) whether this was still true during the period of national exigency when McKenna was disqualified. In any event, the Navy, or certainly the warrant officer selection board, did not consider McKenna as worthy of promotion as Noble does.

Noble's persistent stress on the "normalcy" of a man who yet became a famous author makes it hard to gauge his envisioned audience. McKenna's novel transcended the interests of typical lovers of sea tales, as attested by its seven months on the *Times* bestseller list and the multiple Oscar nominations received by its film adaptation.

This is not a rigorously scholarly biography. Long stretches of its text are bereft of source citations. Too often, Noble trots out old canards—for instance, that enlisted men in the early twentieth century were so despised by their countrymen that, in many navy towns, locals posted signs with the warning "Sailors and Dogs Keep off the Grass" (14). He cites no evidence that this was ever done.<sup>2</sup> The book's secondary source base is weak, and its author too often relies exclusively on a single work.<sup>3</sup>

Noble does provide interesting details about McKenna's inspiration for *The San Pebbles*. He missed the "golden age" of the Yangtze River patrol but served on a patrol boat on the river some ten years after the events of his novel, and he undoubtedly talked to dozens of China hands with direct knowledge of the relevant period. McKenna deserves credit for having the imagination to recreate so

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1. There was no rate of third class petty officer for the machinist rating until 1944. Before that, because of the nature of his duties, a fireman first class received the same pay as a third class petty officer but was not an NCO. Similarly, a US Army specialist (E-4) is today paid the same as a corporal but is not an NCO.

2. A Google search of the phrase yields dozens of hits, but no substantive proof that such signs were ever actually posted anywhere in the past century.

3. E.g., Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Enlisted Force, 1899-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Pr, 1978). (N.b., not "Federick" Harrod as in Noble's bibliography.)

vividly events he himself never experienced. Noble also makes it clear that similarities between McKenna and the protagonist of *The Sand Pebbles*, Jake Holman (played by McQueen), are superficial.

Much like McKenna's naval service, his prize-winning novel is not really about war at all. Widely considered a classic of naval literature, it remains in print today in the US Naval Institute Press's "Classics of Naval Literature" series. But its appeal extends beyond the genre of nautical fiction. It does far more than portray the lives of downtrodden enlisted men on the old China station of the 1920s. Their story suggests a microcosm of western imperialism in the early twentieth century. The gunboat of the title is a floating world where white men control the wondrous technology of steam, while the "yellow men" who serve and live below decks see technology as a species of magic. The heart of the novel challenges this status quo in an allegory of non-westerners defying western hegemony on the world stage.

For readers (and viewers) of *The Sand Pebbles* curious about its author and his background, *Sailor's Homer* now provides more basic facts about Richard McKenna's life and careers than any other source. Its virtues, especially its brevity, will appeal to general readers, if not scholars. Dennis Noble cannot be faulted for the paucity of primary sources available for his subject's life. He is, however, responsible for the inaccurate details, missing attributions, needless digressions, and skimpy secondary bibliography in a book printed by the flagship press of all things Navy.