

## FRED T JANE – The Man and the Wargame

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This is an account of a session at the 2007 Conference of Wargamers featuring Bob Cordery and myself. It consisted of a biographical overview of one of naval history's more unusual characters Fred T Jane, inventor of *Fighting Ships*, followed by a demonstration of his naval wargame.

My contribution was a Powerpoint presentation using some of the many images created by or of Mr Jane during his life. My original title was: FIGHTING SHIPS AND INCUBATED GIRLS, reflecting the paradoxical nature of a man who was:

- founding editor of the most prestigious and longest lived naval reference work.
- artist; novelist; wargamer; pioneer motorist; and political activist.
- Portsmouth's most famous practical joker.

It is impractical to reproduce all the images used, but I enclose a few of particular interest to wargamers, being a publicity photograph of Fred aged about 35, with his wargame, and an illustration from *Strand* magazine of May 1904, showing the Portsmouth Naval Wargame Club. The latter presents a scene familiar to modern gamers, except for the mess kit, and clouds of tobacco smoke. I also enclose an example of how *Fighting Ships* presented ship information for Admiral class battleships in 1901. This was originally engraved in a wooden block, and reused for the Jane wargame.

Fred T Jane was born 6 August 1865 in Richmond, but grew up in the West Country where his father was a clergyman. Educated at Exeter School, Fred left Devon in 1885 to make his fortune in London as a black and white illustrator for the many illustrated magazines still using line and half tone illustrations instead of photographs.

He made his mark sketching the summer manoeuvres of 1890, after some years of poverty, becoming well known for his illustrations of naval events, manoeuvres, disasters, and visits by foreign ships. Some of the latter he had never seen, in particular the *Blanco Encalada*, a Chilean cruiser torpedoed in 1891. Jane's illustration of the attack was so compelling many were convinced he had been present on one of the torpedo boats, though too seasick and/or busy in the boiler room to say much about it. Only after his death was this revealed as his most long-running joke, the picture being painted in the Vicarage garden at Upottery.

Jane also produced real fiction:

- *Blake of the Rattlesnake*, in which a destroyer captain saves Britain from Franco-Russian aggression, clearly feeding off 1890s war scares.
- *The Incubated Girl*, featuring a girl hatched from an egg, and addressing the issue of vivisection (cf. HG Wells's *Island of Dr Moreau*)

- *To Venus in Five Seconds*, in which our hero is kidnapped in a space ship disguised as a summer house, and taken to Venus for medical experiments.
- *The Violet Flame*, a Wyndhamesque catastrophe in which the world is threatened by a mad scientist with a death ray, and nearly destroyed by a comet. Only the Navy stands firm to the end.

The commercial failure of these and less memorable works on social themes persuaded Jane to give up fiction. It's a pity they were not more successful. He addressed similar themes to HG Wells, but was much funnier.

Meanwhile Jane was working on the naval album for which he is remembered, *All the World's Fighting Ships*, which first appeared in 1898. Unlike previous warship directories like *Brassey's Naval Annual*, it was designed for the end user: the man on the bridge trying to identify a distant silhouette on the horizon. *Fighting Ships* presented data in a revolutionary compact format. It focussed on fighting power, not gun calibres or armour thickness, whose value varied depending on when they were made. Jane classed guns and armour alphabetically, 'A' class guns being able to penetrate 'a' to 'e' class armour, 'B' class guns 'b' to 'e' armour, and so on. The format evolved rapidly as Jane absorbed criticism of early editions. Photos replaced drawings, which took too much effort to update. By 1901 the album had settled down into the form it would retain until World War II.

The wooden blocks used, as shown for the Admiral class of battleship, re-appeared in Jane's other invention, the Naval Wargame. This used:

- 2ft squared boards representing 1 nautical mile of 2000yds
- 1/2400 scale cork ships (1.5ins long)
- A dice free shooting system using strikers rather like ping-pong bats to punch holes in simplified targets on flimsy paper, with a pin fixed underneath their head. There were loads of these, all with pins in slightly different positions to give an unpredictable effect. For night actions the target was covered with tissue paper.
- More detailed scorers based on *Fighting Ships* on which the ship's owner recorded any hits. These were concealed from the firing player, who did not know what effect his fire was having.

The great advantage of the firing system was that players' accuracy fell off when their own ship was hit, as it should. Hits tended to be catastrophic or irrelevant. Like *Fighting Ships* the *Jane Naval Wargame* claimed illustrious naval patrons, including Prince Louis of Battenberg, Grand Duke Alexander of the Imperial Russian Navy, and a Captain May RN, and a close associate of the future Admiral Jellicoe. The game cost 4 guineas (£4.20), individual ships a shilling. Bits of one survive, though not the ships or boards, at Jane's Information Group. There are plans to move it to the RN Museum in Portsmouth for conservation.

Jane made enough money from these two products to pursue a rich man's hobbies:

- A battleship grey Benz racing car sounding like a destroyer, which also served as the vehicle for comic pieces in *CAR Illustrated*, in which, amongst other squibs, he compared the Sussex police to Dick Turpin.
- Standing for Parliament in 1906. His final speech ended, 'Damnation to all party politicians'. Jane's most famous political intervention was kidnapping a Labour MP called Victor Grayson outside the 1909 Party Conference, a hoax which made the front page of the national press. His most dangerous was to provoke the 'Battle of Unicorn Gate' by speaking for the Conservatives outside the dockyard.
- Boy Scout exercises involving cars, trams, and airships.
- Building a pioneer aircraft, which fell into a tree and caught fire. The inventor commented at least that was one less to include in his new book, *All the World's Airships*.

Jane's later years were less amusing. He alienated the naval establishment, by suggesting, among other things, that the RN should throw Nelson overboard. His first wife died in 1908, and his second marriage ended in separation. The First World War destroyed the information networks on which *Fighting Ships* depended. Censors prevented publication of details of British warships, which the Germans must have had already. Jane travelled the country in his open topped Benz explaining the war's progress, pouring scorn on claims that Germans were all cowards. However, a public which viewed war like a football match objected to his often paradoxical assessments. He caught a chill driving to Cheltenham, and died in March 1916, depriving us of his comments on Jutland. An unverifiable family tradition claims Jane committed suicide, depressed by the war, and the breakdown of his marriage. The death certificate gives heart failure and influenza as causes of death, so who knows.

Fred T Jane remains a paradoxical, complex figure to the end of his life and beyond. Less successful than corporate mythologists might like, his name is still associated with the original purpose of *Fighting Ships*; i.e. the provision of accurate technical information to governments, armed services and the public.

I would like to thank everyone who attended the talk, especially Bob Cordery, without whose technical support at every turn, the session would have been impossible. The main source was my book *Fred T Jane An Eccentric Visionary* published by Jane's Information Group in 1997. Allegedly it is available from them at their Coulsdon HQ for £20.

Images:

- 1) Fred T Jane and the Naval Wargame c.1900



2) The Portsmouth Naval Wargame Club 1904



3) *Fighting Ships* data display for Admiral class battleship 1901

ADMIRAL CLASS.  
(III.) HOWE (1885): RODNEY (1884).

10,800 tons. Complement 545.

(Dimensions) L. B. D.: 325 × 68 × 29 feet = 99 × 20·7 × 8·8 metres.

Guns:  
4A (13·5 in.).  
6D<sub>+</sub> (6 in., 26 cal., converted).  
12\* (6 pdr., 57 m/m).  
10\* (3 pdr., 47 m/m).  
7 machine.  
Torpedo tubes:  
4 above water.  
(Howe has also a bow above water tube).

Armour (compound): m/m.  
18" Belt . . . . . aa (456).  
3" Deck (steel) . . . = d (76).  
[Deck flat on belt.]  
Protection to vitals = aa.  
16" Bulkheads . . . . . aa (405).  
11½" Barbettes . . . . . aaa (290).  
12" Barbette hoists . . . . . a (305).  
Battery bulkheads (steel).  
14" Conning tower (steel) a (355).

