

Representing the Royal Navy. British Sea Power, 1750–1815

Review Number:

436

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 February, 2005

Author:

Margarette Lincoln

ISBN:

754608301X

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£37.50

Pages:

239pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Aldershot

Reviewer:

Cindy McCreery

Now is an appropriate time to consider the role of the British Navy and its cultural significance. 2005 marks the bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar, the apogee of British naval glory. Trafalgar is a story of national tragedy as well as triumph, of course, as Britain's stunning victory over the French came at a huge cost, namely the loss of Admiral Horatio Nelson. Nelson's death in battle transformed him into a national hero and he became the most revered naval hero in the British pantheon. Now, as then, Nelson's memory is commemorated in diverse forms. The coming year will see a vast array of public events celebrating Nelson and Trafalgar. The commemoration has already begun, in fact. In October 2004 the National Maritime Museum and the Institute of Historical Research sponsored the 'Rediscovering Nelson' lecture series, and there is much more to come in 'SeaBritain 2005 – a year-long festival of the sea'.⁽¹⁾

Nelson and Trafalgar are not the only focal points of interest, however. Naval battles during the War of American Independence (1776–1781) and the Napoleonic Wars (1793–1815) maintain a firm hold on the public imagination. The continued popularity of historical novels detailing late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century naval life by C. S. Forester, Patrick O'Brien and Alexander Kent has been augmented by films, including the recent box office hit *Master and Commander: the Far Side of the World*, starring Russell Crowe as naval officer Jack Aubrey. People are drawn to the romance, the majesty, the tales of heroism, of courageous behaviour during and after battle, and, not least, the satisfaction of having an easily identifiable and dignified enemy – the French.

Scholars have also been fascinated by the Royal Navy in this period. There is a long tradition of works on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British naval history. Moreover, recent years have seen a reawakening of interest and a redirection of inquiry in the Royal Navy's place in British and imperial history.⁽²⁾ Scholars'

focus has broadened from accounts measuring the number of ships and men, success and failure in war and blow-by-blow accounts of battles (although these topics have continued to attract popular attention), to more nuanced accounts that locate the Navy within a broader social, political and economic context.

Of particular importance is the work of N.A.M. Rodger, including his pioneering *The Wooden World: an Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (1986) and his recent *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* (2004), which was recently named one of the best books of the year by the *Economist* magazine (27/11/04). So too, Roger Morriss's *The Royal Dockyards During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (1983) and Brian Lavery's work *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organisation 1793–1815* (1990) have helped us to understand better the Navy's role within eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. New works, such as Clive Wilkinson's *The British Navy and the State in the Eighteenth Century* (2004) and, although not limited to the Navy, M. John Cardwell's *Arts and Arms: Literature, Politics and Patriotism During the Seven Years War* (2004), indicate that contemporary scholars are increasingly aware of the political and cultural significance of the eighteenth-century Navy.

But what did contemporaries *think* about naval officers, and indeed the Royal Navy itself? How did the Navy represent itself, and to what end?

Margaret Lincoln's *Representing the Royal Navy. British Sea Power 1750–1815* grows out of this interest in the social world of the Navy and its relationship to British society in general, but goes much further. This is an ambitious and impressive work, which combines original archival research with a useful synthesis of other scholars' findings. It considers the cultural significance of the Navy in the period 1750–1815 by analysing key groups' attitudes to and relationship with the Navy. Lincoln devotes a chapter to each of the following: 'The Navy's self-image' (especially how officers represented the Navy); 'The Navy and politics' (Parliament's response to the Navy, as well as the many links between individual naval officers and the House of Commons in particular, e.g. as MPs); 'The Navy and trade' (how merchants saw the Navy, and the support which they provided (e.g. prizes and awards)); 'The Navy and religious opinion' (Anglicans' response to the Navy, both in terms of individual clergymen's sermons and other writings on the Navy, and the Church's support for the Navy on a national level); 'Waiting on the shore' (women's response to the Navy, and in particular mothers', wives' and sweethearts' expression of longing for absent officers and sailors); and 'The Navy and its doctors' (the attitudes of doctors to the Navy and their role in improving life at sea). The book ends with 'Post-war blues', a chapter on perceptions of the Navy after 1815, as the shift to peacetime reduced the prominence of the Navy in national life, and brought about increased hardships for officers and men as opportunities for regular employment and promotion dwindled.

Lincoln has chosen an important period (1750–1815), and is to be congratulated on starting well before the age of Nelson. While our knowledge of the Navy during the Napoleonic Wars at the end of the eighteenth century is relatively ample, we know much less about its position at mid-century. Lincoln's book is the first to address the Navy's reputation and representation in this period. *Representing the Royal Navy* tackles its subject successfully, and I have only minor criticisms of an otherwise impressive piece of scholarship. Inevitably, by covering such a large topic, which spans over half a century and covers masses of material, Lincoln's book pays greater attention to some areas than to others, and some over-generalisations occur. To take a small and perhaps insignificant example, while Lincoln claims (p. 3) that images of sailors as 'Jack Tar' were always sentimental, in fact mid-century images of 'Jack Tar' were frequently comical but rarely sentimental. 'Jack Tar', in other words, could be represented in numerous ways, and the transition to the late eighteenth-century stereotype that Lincoln outlines was more gradual and partial than she suggests.⁽³⁾

One of the many strengths of Lincoln's approach, however, is that it makes excellent use of primary source material, in particular newspaper articles, pamphlets, sermons and books written by naval officers (with a sprinkling of voices from ordinary sailors, whose voice is, as Lincoln points out, difficult to recover), as well as material produced by groups who developed a special connection with the Navy, such as merchants. Understandably, the author relies heavily on published accounts, many of which provide rich descriptions of life both above and below decks. Yet, as Lincoln points out, published accounts were often written with a particular aim, for example, to promote the Navy with politicians, or to bring about some internal reform.

While such accounts tell us about public campaigns, they do not tell us what people thought privately. Unpublished, private accounts, such as diaries and correspondence, might indicate more complex or diverse responses to the Navy. Moreover, many published accounts offer fictional rather than firsthand accounts of life in the Navy. Even fictional representations of naval life are revealing, of course, but it should perhaps be made clearer to the reader that there is some artistic licence involved. For example, ‘Jack Nastyface’ (p. 25) was the pseudonym adopted by the seaman William Robinson, while ‘Alfred Burton, a master’s mate under Sir Samuel Hood’ (p. 25) was in fact the journalist John Mitford. Mitford did serve with Hood in the Navy, but his reputation for colourful writing should be kept in mind when assessing his account of life in the Navy during the Napoleonic Wars.⁽⁴⁾

While printed material predominates, Lincoln’s book encompasses a diverse array of sources, including oil portraits, reproductive engravings, satirical prints (cartoons) and commemorative ware, such as pottery, medals and jewellery. Her description of these items and their consumption is augmented by numerous images, several of which are handsomely reproduced in colour. This is certainly to be welcomed; we need to see this material, so much of which, despite the excellent efforts of museums such as the National Maritime Museum and, in Australia, the Australian National Maritime Museum, remains largely ‘invisible’ to the wider public. Seeing these objects in colour (that is, as contemporaries would have seen them) helps us to understand the importance of the Navy for Britons in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Having said that, it should be recognised that for many people these items were too expensive for personal consumption and would have been seen at a distance – adorning other people and other people’s homes. Moreover, for some Britons (particularly those with no direct connection to the Navy) the Navy may not have been a symbol chosen to decorate their clothing or china; other institutions, such as army regiments or local militia, political candidates, religious figures or even sporting heroes would have claimed their attention and expenditure. Nevertheless, Lincoln’s discussion of the diverse range and huge volume of material demonstrates that the Navy did hold a prominent place in British society, and it seems clear that many people were made aware of its activities through the commemorative items produced.

Lincoln has mined the superb collections of material at the National Maritime Museum to great effect. One of the many virtues of this book is the way in which it draws our attention to the richness of this national collection, and further demonstrates the function of material culture in historical analysis. Linda Young’s recent book *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America, Australia and Britain* (2002) explores the cultural meanings of items such as furniture and other domestic objects for middle-class families in Britain and the colonies. Given the volume and diversity of material produced with regard to the Royal Navy, it would be worth exploring the reception and use of this material in Britain. In other words, future research should move beyond the very useful start made by Lincoln in showcasing the range of material produced, and consider how the public consumed this material. When and where did people wear and use navy-themed items, and was it on an occasional, seasonal or regular basis? Was such consumption greater/more common in seaports than inland areas? While such questions are notoriously difficult to answer fully, they are worth pursuing.

In conclusion, *Representing the Royal Navy. British Sea Power, 1750–1815* is a wonderful addition to naval scholarship. Lincoln’s writing style is fluent and her observations shrewd. Her book provides an important contribution to our understanding of the contemporary significance of one of Britain’s most venerable, as well as sizeable (particularly in wartime) institutions. It demonstrates how much the Navy mattered in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, and what a rich and diverse response it evoked. Lincoln’s work should inspire much further work on this topic. Scholars and others interested in naval history have much to look forward to, both in 2005 and beyond.

Notes

1. For information on ‘SeaBritain 2005 – a year-long festival of the sea’, see the website of the National Maritime Museum: <https://www.nmm.ac.uk> [2]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The history of colonial Australia, for example, was heavily influenced by the Royal Navy. Royal Navy

ships first explored the Australian continent's coastline in the late eighteenth century, and later transported thousands of British and Irish men and women as convicts, soldiers and government officials to Sydney Cove and other fledgling Australian ports. Indeed, many of the early governors and colonial administrators had naval backgrounds, and in the early nineteenth century many officers on half-pay, who had little prospect of employment at home, took advantage of generous land grants to emigrate to Australia. While some work has been done on these naval links between Britain and Australia, there is still much to explore. My current research on the Duke of Edinburgh's visit to Australia in 1867-8 indicates that naval connections remained strong almost a century after Captain Cook first arrived in Australia. See C. McCreery, 'The Voyage of the Duke of Edinburgh in HMS Galatea to Australia, 1867-8', in K. Darian-Smith, P. Grimshaw, K. Lindsey and S. Macintyre, eds., *Exploring the British World* (Melbourne, 2004), pp. 959-978.[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. See C. McCreery, 'True Blue and Black, Brown and Fair: prints of sailors and their women during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 23 (2000), 135-52.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See H. Baynham, 'Robinson, William (*bap.* 1787, *d.* in or after 1836)' (10 Dec. 2004 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/73929>) [3] and J. Gilliland, 'Mitford, John (1782-1831)' (10 Dec. 2004 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18855>), [4]*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).[Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

[5]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/436#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2408>

[2] <https://www.nmm.ac.uk/>

[3] <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/73929>

[4] <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18855>

[5] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>