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Evangelicals in the Royal Navy, 1775-1815: Blue Lights and Psalm-Singers

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Notwithstanding the outpouring of heavyweight publications that attended the 2005 Trafalgar bicentenary, popular perceptions of life in Nelson's navy still revolve around the brutal, filthy, drink-sodden hellhole presented in recent television adaptations of Hornblower and William Golding's *To the Ends of the Earth* trilogy. Serious scholarship, however, paints rather a different picture. For one thing, it is now widely accepted that the Hanoverian navy was a formidable fighting machine, serviced by an immense, costly, complex and 'for its day' remarkably effective shore establishment. Contemporary politicians were only too eager to lavish money upon it, recognizing that naval might was essential, not only to defend British liberties at home, but also for the projection of power and the protection of commerce abroad. The ever-increasing demands of naval expenditure played a central part in the growth of the 'fiscal-military state'.⁽¹⁾ Revisionist historians have also been drawn to challenge erroneous assumptions regarding life afloat. Naturally enough, officers were well aware that physical well-being and fighting effectiveness went hand-in-hand. As Nicholas Rodger argues, conditions in the 'wooden world' compared favourably 'for the most part' with those on land. 'There is no doubt', he asserts, 'that its food was one of the attractions of the Navy'.⁽²⁾ And as both he and John D. Byrn have shown, although there were indeed martinets who prescribed inordinately harsh punishment, on the whole such behaviour was frowned upon.⁽³⁾ Cleanliness was pursued obsessively, and commanders fretted ceaselessly about the health of their men. So much for

‘rum, sodomy and the lash’! *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy* throws new light on another misunderstood aspect of the late-Hanoverian navy, showing that it paid growing attention not only to physical welfare, but also to the moral and spiritual health of its sailors. Thanks to the foundations laid by a cadre of highly influential Evangelical officers – the ‘Blue Lights’ of the title – the 19th-century navy differed dramatically from its 18th-century counterpart, being characterized by a deep concern for morality, humanity and regular religious observance.

Some work already exists on naval religion, most of it – like Gordon Taylor’s *The Sea Chaplains* (1978) – focused on the clergy. Yet, as Blake makes clear, the reforming currents at work in the navy during the decades after the American Revolutionary war drew most of their strength from heightened religiosity among the officer corps. This was emphatically a lay movement. *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy* contends that between 1775 and 1815 religion in general – and Evangelicalism in particular – became integral to naval life. In doing this, it draws upon an impressive range of archival sources, as well as making extensive use of contemporary pamphlets and publications. For these reasons alone, it should be compulsory reading for naval and religious scholars alike. But there is also a broader sense in which this book is significant. Many of the most exciting recent developments in naval and military scholarship have come about through reconnecting attitudes, practices and culture in the armed forces with those in wider society. Like *The Redcoat and Religion* (2005), Michael Snape’s seminal study of the religious experience of the British soldier, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy* comes as a salutary reminder that historians need to consider religion and religious activity not merely in terms of personal observance, or even of philanthropic do-goodery, but as influencing society, culture and politics in much more subtle and far-reaching ways. Although the book does not pursue this theme overtly, it serves to highlight a prevailing tendency to assume, anachronistically, that religion had little or no place in the public sphere.

Given the growing purchase of Evangelical religion among late 18th-century politicians and public men, it ought to come as no surprise that piety also began to infuse naval culture in this period. ‘Historians’, Blake reminds us at the outset, ‘have always known that Evangelicalism got into the navy’ (p.1). True, but religious scholars have tended to disregard potential lines of enquiry concerning naval and military affairs, while in their turn naval scholars have – with a few exceptions – almost entirely ignored religion. This neglect can be ascribed in part to the latter group’s preoccupation with tactics, technology and floating foreign policy, but it also owes something to the supposition that the navy was a profoundly irreligious environment. There is some truth in this view: contemporary opinion held that sailors – being beyond the reach of conventional, parochial Anglicanism – were irretrievably immoral, profane and superstitious.⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, although the 1731 *Regulations and Instructions* made provision for the presence of a chaplain, many captains displayed a pronounced disinclination to take clergymen on board. Those few impoverished clerics who were prepared to brave the privations (and meagre pay) of shipboard life were frequently disregarded. ‘I was fed, coaxed and stared at – if in my den, forgotten; if at large in every body’s way; of no manner of use – and at best, endured,’ wrote one (p. 76). (Perhaps this explains why naval chaplains in fictional accounts tend to be so eccentric, impecunious and disagreeable.) Yet at the same time, as Blake points out, the navy was integral to Britain’s religious self-identity. Ever since the 16th century, Protestants had seen their fleet as a crucial bulwark against the Catholic powers of Europe (pp. 10–16). If the early 18th century witnessed a steep decline in land-based efforts to proselytise within the service, recent writing on national character emphasizes that the equation of Protestantism and naval power retained immense popular resonance.⁽⁵⁾ Considered in this light, it was symbolically significant that daily prayer using the Church of England liturgy was prescribed in the *Regulations*, even if it was observed at sea only sporadically. In theory, at least, the senior service was firmly rooted in confessional Anglicanism.

All this provides important background, for it becomes clear as the opening chapter unfolds that it was a growing sense of the disparity between the confessional, pastoral ideal and the realities of life afloat that prompted renewed attention to religious provision. That this feeling crystallized when it did owed much to the dynamism of a few pious officers, as Blake argues, but it must also be seen in the light of trends ashore. With British society reeling in the 1780s from the loss of the American colonies, there existed a deep-seated sense of national crisis, which manifested itself in a mounting barrage of calls for moral renovation. The

ensuing decades witnessed the proliferation of moral, improving and proselytising societies, the abolition of the British slave trade and ? crucially ? the spread of Evangelicalism among the great and good. The desire to evangelise servicemen reflected the concerns of an increasingly influential movement, one that sought to use every practical means at its disposal ? including patronage, preferment and political clout ? to convert the nation to heartfelt religion.(6)

Blake divides Evangelical activity in the navy into four main phases. The first, spanning the 1780s and 90s, grew out of concerns regarding indiscipline and immorality. These problems were to be countered by recruiting conscientious chaplains and reversing the prevailing neglect of public worship. A similar programme was promulgated during the second phase, which extended from the French Revolutionary War until the coming of peace in 1815, but with much greater resources being put into active evangelism. This was the period in which the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), the Naval & Military Bible Society and the Religious Tract Society came to prominence as providers of Bibles, prayerbooks and tracts. The third phase, from the late 1790s onwards, was marked by the growth of informal, Methodist-style prayer- and Bible gatherings in the fleet, a phenomenon that became relatively common in the later years of the Napoleonic War. A fourth and final phase in the years after 1815 ? outlined briefly in the final chapter ? focused on transforming the wider maritime milieu ashore through seamen?s missions and other welfare schemes. Although rather more space in the book is devoted to the first two phases than the latter two, this fourfold division is nonetheless a useful summary which is worth bearing in mind for what follows.

The reader?s first proper encounter with the Blue Lights takes place in chapter two, where several of the group?s pioneers are introduced. Its leading member was Charles Middleton, an irascible sea-captain-turned-administrator who used his position as Comptroller of the Navy (1778?90) to agitate for bureaucratic reform. Like his contemporaries, historians have not been unappreciative of Middleton?s administrative aptitude, but, now as then, some find his hectoring correspondence, ostentatious piety and unashamed careerism hard to stomach. While fairly sympathetic towards the Comptroller?s foibles, the author is not uncritical. But it is clear that this is not his main concern; of much more importance for this book is Middleton?s place in the wider Evangelical world, and in particular his connections with two other individuals who shared his religious concerns: his fellow reformer Rear-Admiral Richard Kempenfelt, a convinced Methodist, and James Ramsay, Middleton?s one-time surgeon and later chaplain. It is as an abolitionist writer that Ramsay is usually remembered; indeed, alongside Hannah More, William Wilberforce and the black emancipist Olaudah Equiano, he and Middleton were leading members of the circle which assembled at Teston in the late 1780s to plan the parliamentary campaign. This story is a familiar one, and the book rightly devotes only a few pages to it. More groundbreaking is the exploration of the interactions between Middleton, Kempenfelt and Ramsay. The manifesto developed by these men during the 1780s ? emphasizing the responsibility of the captain for religion and good conduct on board ship, in conjunction with a sober, serious chaplain ? shaped Blue Light attitudes for years to come.

Chapter three commences with a brief examination of ships? logs, which ? coupled with anecdotal evidence ? suggest that services were held more often during the 1790s and 1800s. Yet, as Blake is quick to emphasize, this had little to do with evangelistic fervour. Pamphlets, periodicals and prints bear eloquent witness to the quasi-religious overtones of Britain?s crusade against French atheism and anarchy. In the navy, as elsewhere, there was a growing appreciation that divine sanction could be called upon to inculcate loyalty to King and country, to encourage submission to rank and ? above all ? to buttress discipline. This was why the authoritarian Earl St Vincent ? no Evangelical himself ? made divine worship compulsory in his fleets, and it also helps to explain why SPCK minutes from the 1790s record such a dramatic rise in requests from captains for Bibles and prayerbooks. William Bedford of the *Royal Sovereign* was one of several convinced that ?a packet of books received from the Society caused a happy change in the mind and conduct? of his ship?s company, as he informed the SPCK in 1798 (p. 83). Whether or not this was genuinely the case, between 1793 and 1812 (when the demand became too great to be handled centrally) the SPCK supplied consignments of books to at least 375 ships (p. 95). A vogue for moralizing ?sea sermons? reveals that chaplains too were keen to make their presence felt.

If the third chapter makes the point that Evangelicals were not alone in their concern for shipboard worship,

it soon becomes evident that the religion of obedience and good conduct propounded in many tracts was worlds away from spiritual conversion and the personal faith in Christ they believed to be the true remedy. Chapter four examines seven serving officers in the period 1793-1802, contending that their behaviour fashioned 'a new consensus about evangelical aims', one which stressed 'persuasion and humanity' as much as formal religious observance and moral exhortation (p. 105). This change of tack, according to Blake, is perceptible in the preaching of chaplains such as Edward Ward and the evangelistic tracts of the Marine officer Andrew Burn, as well as informing the careers of high-profile captains like James Gambier, C. V. Penrose and Edward Pellew, and admirals Sir James Saumarez and Adam Duncan. That most of these adopted a humane approach to discipline cannot be doubted, but this chapter may overplay the idea that Evangelicals were always compassionate. After all, they were not noted for their optimism about human nature, and in other walks of life tended to see temporal punishment not as an unmitigated evil but as a way to awaken sin-sick souls. 'Preaching Jemmy' Gambier, for instance, was certainly humane, but was also notorious in the service for his austere severity. Or to take another example: if the disciplinarian Pellew 'appears out of step' with the other exemplars mentioned (p. 139), might this not suggest that there were other genuinely religious men who were prepared to take a similarly harsh line towards defaulters? Here and elsewhere in the book, Blake can afford to be confident in rehabilitating the reputation of the Evangelicals without feeling the need to defend their every action.

The 1800s witnessed an unprecedented rise in the status of religion in the navy. Partly this was due to Nelson's overt religiosity, which 'although 'not the piety of the Blue Lights', as the fifth chapter goes to pains to point out 'shaped the views of many up-and-coming officers (pp. 142-51). Of more lasting significance was the elevation of Middleton to the peerage and his appointment as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1805. The fact that his nephew, Gambier, was already at the Admiralty meant that 'for a time, at least 'Evangelical influence predominated there. Here was a prime chance to implement the 1780s programme in full. The resulting revision of the *Regulations and Instructions* bore many marks of this, spelling out officers' responsibilities for the spiritual and general welfare of their men, as well as codifying the educational and pastoral roles of the chaplain for the first time. (Further improvements to chaplains' conditions of service were implemented in 1812.) That compassionate Christianity was indeed gaining wider purchase in the profession is reflected in *The Naval Chronicle*, where a set of articles authored by Penrose sparked heated debate over the dehumanising effects of naval discipline.

The longest chapter by some way is the sixth, which seeks to set the record straight concerning the idea that pious officers were 'more fitted for the organ-loft than the quarter deck' (p. 174). In one sense, it is surprising that anyone should ever have paid any attention to this canard: Saumarez, Duncan and Pellew were among the navy's most celebrated fighting officers, and there were several others 'Jahleel Brenton, James Hillyar and Francis Austen 'who combined professional skill with proven piety. The unfavourable stereotype, Blake explains, is based almost entirely on the action at Aix Roads in 1809, where Gambier's failure to capitalize fully on the situation provoked charges of inaction and incompetence from a subordinate, Lord Cochrane. Although scholars are well aware that Cochrane was a radical MP with an anti-government axe to grind, this chapter demonstrates that they have been too apt to swallow both his version of events and his anti-Evangelical prejudices.⁽⁷⁾ Granted, Gambier was no Nelson, but it is absurd to suppose that his religion made him a shrinking violet: at the Glorious First of June in 1794, for example, he was brave to the point of recklessness, and his role in the controversial bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807 suggests a decidedly ruthless streak. Most importantly, the 1809 court-martial fully exonerated his conduct at Aix Roads, and while the incident certainly brought to the fore longstanding fears in the profession regarding Evangelical influence in high places 'a theme which deserves lengthier treatment than this book allows 'it seems that historians have done Gambier a disservice.

Chapter seven turns away from the Blue Lights in order to examine the prayer groups that formed the focus of the 'Naval Awakening' of the 1800s. A paucity of first-hand accounts means that this phenomenon has often appeared elusive, but, like Roald Kverndal's *Seamen's Missions: Their Origin and Early Growth* (1986), this chapter shows that it is possible to catch informative glimpses of it. Using later reminiscences and published anecdotes, Blake describes how groups of 'psalm-singers' (as they were derisively known)

were active on board some 80 ships by the time the war ended, supported financially and practically by pious contacts ashore; he also notes that there were revivalist stirrings among the naval prisoners of war held by the French at Givet, Verdun and elsewhere.⁽⁸⁾ The question of how such groups were related to the Blue Lights is an intriguing one, in that lower-deck religion was more akin to Methodism than to the sober Anglican Evangelicalism of many officers. Gatherings usually sprang up without officers' intervention, but as Lieutenant Richard Marks stressed in his autobiographical *Retrospect* they could not thrive without the approval (tacit or otherwise) of those in authority. So whereas some commanders feared that Methodist-style groups might well subvert distinctions of rank, others actively sought to encourage personal faith through setting up reading classes and establishing subscription libraries. Though differing in provenance, Blake contends, the two movements were closely interlinked, and it was symbolically apt that both the ex-sailor and Baptist Minister 'Bo'sun' George Charles Smith and the officer-turned-clergyman Marks became leading lights in the post-war maritime missionary movement.

In sum, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy* charts waters that until now have remained largely unmapped. Like many pioneering studies, it is not exhaustive; those familiar with Margarete Lincoln's work on cultural representations of the navy, for instance, might well be interested to read more about how Evangelical publicists exploited the achievements of prominent Blue Lights in order to push the idea that British heroes ought also to be pious.⁽⁹⁾ 'Let this for ever silence those who assert that religion incapacitates for the uses of this life' was an oft-repeated remark in pious periodicals. More, too, needs to be written on how the Evangelicals manipulated patronage, for although this receives some attention, the author's desire to exculpate the Blue Lights from undue criticisms prevents closer examination. Yet this should not detract from Blake's very considerable achievement. That the 19th-century public viewed the navy as an instrument of moral policy had much to do with the role of the West Africa squadron in enforcing the slavery ban, but the spread of morality and religion among British tars lent the idea added verisimilitude. This book explains how the foundations were laid, and if as the introduction hints there are plans for a sequel covering the post-war navy, it is to be eagerly awaited.

Notes

1. Roger Morriss, *Naval Power and British culture 1760-1850: Public Trust and Government Ideology* (Aldershot, 2004); N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: a Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (London, 2004); Clive Wilkinson, *The British Navy and the State in the Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 2004). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: an Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London, 1986), p. 87. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *ibid*; John D. Byrn, *Crime and Punishment in the Royal Navy: Discipline in the Leeward Islands Station, 1784-1812* (Aldershot, 1989). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 169-85. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, CT, 1992); Kathleen Wilson, 'Empire, trade and popular politics in mid-Hanoverian Britain: the case of Admiral Vernon?', *Past & Present*, 121 (1988), 74-109. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. I have written about this subject elsewhere: see Gareth Atkins, *Wilberforce and his Milieux: the Worlds of Anglican Evangelicalism, c.1780-1830* (University of Cambridge: unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 2009). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. For a recent reassessment of Cochrane's political and controversial career, see Timothy Jenks, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics and the Royal Navy 1793-1815* (Oxford, 2006), ch. 5. Discussion of the incident in question is to be found on pp. 267-8. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. A minor error regarding one of the group's main financial backers is to be found on p. 235: W. H. Hoare was indeed a banker, but he belonged to Messrs Hoares of Fleet Street, which was unrelated to the Quaker family firm that bore the same name. See Victoria Hutchings, *Messrs Hoare bankers: a History of the Hoare Banking Dynasty* (London, 2005). [Back to \(8\)](#)

9. Margarette Lincoln, *Representing the Royal Navy: British Sea Power, 1750?1815* (Aldershot, 2002).
[Back to \(9\)](#)

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