



## *British Flag Officers in the French Wars, 1793–1815: Admirals' Lives*

by John Morrow.

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Political scientist John Morrow (Univ. of Auckland) envisions two sorts of readers for his new book: scholars of the history of the British Royal Navy, specifically in the Napoleonic era, and the legions of fans of the historical fiction of C.S. Forester<sup>1</sup> and Patrick O'Brian.<sup>2</sup> Morrow has delved deeply into British government archives and manuscript collections donated to museums and university libraries by the families of prominent naval personalities from the Napoleonic Wars. The result is a rich portrait of the professional and personal lives of flag officers and their multi-faceted relations with the ever more demanding bureaucratic structure that was the Admiralty.<sup>3</sup>

After a brief introductory chapter, the first of the book's twelve thematic chapters, "The Challenge of Command," addresses the many and varied leadership qualities expected of flag officers on active service. Chapter 3, "Authority and Command," deals with the authoritarian tradition of British naval service, exploring the language of subordination as it worked in practice during interactions between superiors and subordinates with differing temperaments. Chapter 4, "Anxiety and Failure," concerns the bad effects of the Royal Navy's rigid adherence to advancement by seniority, which led to the promotion of unqualified flag officers to positions of greater responsibility. Chapters 5 and 6, "Difficult Superiors," "Difficult Inferiors," explain the relations of flag officers with both their subordinates and their superiors at the Admiralty Board.

Morrow describes several cases of mutual recriminations that rocked the Navy and jeopardized critical operations. We get a fine sense of the overweening arrogance of admirals like Sir John Jervis, later Lord St. Vincent, who did not suffer fools gladly and saw them at every turn when his orders were questioned. "When St. Vincent's openly declared sense of personal and professional invincibility was infused with an element of paranoia, it gave rise to an idea of absolute authority that militated against the smallest degree of tolerance or accommodation" (74). St. Vincent's goading of Vice Adm. Sir John Orde over a trivial issue during the blockade of Cadiz in 1798 erupted into a rancorous dispute that sorely tried the Admiralty, thanks in part to Orde's own "vanity and pomposity" (75).

Chapter 7, "Admirals and Mutineers," concerns the appalling treatment of common sailors in the Royal Navy, many of whom were forcibly "pressed" into service aboard ships of the fleet. Their

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1. Esp. the eleven-volume Horatio Hornblower series (1937–67), which takes the protagonist from his days as a midshipman through his final command as a rear admiral.

2. Esp. the twenty-volume series of novels (1969–99) featuring the friendship of Capt. Jack Aubrey and ship's physician and naturalist Stephen Maturin. O'Brian's fascination with the manners and mores of the Georgian era as well as naval operations has won him a broad readership.

3. Established during the reign of Charles I, the Admiralty executed the duties of the former Lord High Admiral. Headed by a First Lord, it was responsible for the operational side of the Royal Navy, while administrative responsibilities on shore were the domain of the Navy Board, subordinate to the First Lord and the Admiralty Board.

justified grievances motivated the great mutinies at Spithead and the Nore in 1797, as well as several small-scale, single-ship incidents of rebellion and indiscipline. The author sets such protests in the broader context of the rebellious spirit unleashed by the French Revolution.

In the eighteenth century concerted disobedience was often a form of quasi-industrial action designed to address particular grievances rather than a final rejection of authority, but from the 1790s some historians have discerned the influence of popular radicalism and Irish republicans in framing these incidents. (108)

While these mutinies sometimes threatened national security, “they also posed a fundamental challenge to the system of discipline that flag officers were responsible for upholding ... and dealt sharp blows to their professional pride and to preconceptions about their relationship with the men under their command” (108).

Chapters 8 and 9, “Georgian Patronage Network” and “Service Interest,” adopt a more sociological perspective. In the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth, patronage and personal connections counted for almost everything in the social, political, and professional domains in the United Kingdom. The Royal Navy was atypical in that success and promotion depended largely on gaining complex professional skills by going to sea at a very young age. While incompetence was common on the operational, tactical, and strategic levels in the age of sail, poor seamanship was seldom excused. (No comparable emphasis was placed on professional military skills within the British Army, where promotions could be purchased and social status was the most highly prized quality in officers.)

Chapters 10 and 11 treat “Admirals’ Ambitions” in subsections titled “Promotion and Employment,” and “Wealth and Honor.” We learn here how capricious one’s career progression might be on the administrative side of the Royal Navy in the target era. The influence of patronage and family standing (if any) could be negated by chance and circumstance.

It is pleasing to read in chapters 12 and 13, “Admirals Afloat” and “Admirals Ashore,” of the many happy marriages among the Royal Navy admirals despite the strains of long separations forced on spouses by professional obligations. Vice Adm. Cuthbert Collingwood’s long service with the Mediterranean Fleet after Trafalgar imposed an increasingly wearisome burden on him, lightened only slightly by letters from his wife and daughters. “Collingwood told [Sir Charles] Cotton [his second in command] that he kept his daughters’ letters on his table and ‘when I am sad—and I am often sad—I think I find comfort and consolation in reading them—they seem to convey a promise of future happiness’” (224).

In retirement, some fortunate admirals benefited from prize money as well as prosperous marriages. Some found happiness in their status as landowners. Morrow touches on the lives ashore of men like Sir Hyde Parker, Lord Keith, Sir James Saumarez, Lord Hood, Sir William Cornwallis and, at greater length, Lord Nelson—a popular hero notorious for his prolonged extramarital escapade. We learn, too, of Nelson’s unappealing vanity and greed.

Morrow compiles abundant evidence of the persistent, often frustrating realities of service and advancement that every sea officer experienced—too often to the detriment of the Navy’s effectiveness. Patronage could in some circumstances work to the advantage of the service, but it just as often put less capable officers in commands of critical importance. The rigid seniority system restricted promotions to flag rank to captains at the top of the list, relegating many exceptional officers to positions of lesser responsibility. This caused a deficit of initiative and sound judgment in ships, squadrons, and fleets operating far from the anxious eyes of the Admiralty.

Late in the eighteenth century, in an effort to mitigate the evils of its seniority system, the Admiralty promoted top of the list captains to the rank of rear admiral in a “Yellow Squadron” but removed them from active service. More deserving, but lower seniority captains were promoted into the regular command chain as admirals in the Blue, White, and Red squadrons. During the Napoleonic Wars, the Admiralty Board sometimes simply passed over some officers and considered their inevitable appeals for promotion on a case-by-case basis. Assignment to the Yellow Squadron appealed to many “aged and often infirm” officers (166) because of the higher compensation it carried as compared to that of superannuated captains. The practice of passing over senior but ill-qualified officers at the top of the captains’ list was certainly wise but also politically risky, given the powerful influence of patronage and personal connections in the late Georgian era.

Morrow clarifies as well how the useful but problematic prize-money incentive system elevated personal financial concerns into the heart of naval decision-making.

Given the amounts at stake, the disrupted sequencing of communications which affected flag officers’ place in command structures and the labyrinth of eighteenth-century English law, it is not surprising that there were a number of protracted and expensive disputes between flag officers over prize money. (189)

Historian Sarah Kinkel has perceptively observed that “the Royal Navy was the single largest organization of people and resources in the entire empire”<sup>4</sup> and, by the Napoleonic Era, likely the best organized military bureaucracy in Europe, having grown inexorably since the time of Pepys. That expansion, Morrow asserts, placed immense administrative and financial burdens on admirals serving on distant stations: “When Nelson commanded in the Mediterranean ... the volume of correspondence on logistical and supply issues far outweighed that on strategic matters” (15). This even though the period of the Mediterranean command (1803–5) posed great dangers for England from a strategic standpoint.

Flag officers in major commands could easily enrich themselves through prize money and had considerable discretion to obligate government funds to procure supplies locally, but they also faced considerable challenges the longer they remained in command. Competent (and honest) administrative personnel needed to help serving flag officers, for example, with voluminous Admiralty correspondence, were often thin on the ground. And, too, Admiralty bureaucrats were relentless and unforgiving in settling accounts, often hounding the most eminent senior officers into retirement and, on occasion, even withholding their “half-pay.”

John Morrow’s welcome new, comprehensive, thoroughly researched tour d’horizon of the senior ranks of one of history’s most successful naval organizations at the peak of its success and fame will make instructive and engaging reading for its target audiences.

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4. See Christopher Nelson’s interview, “Disciplining the Empire—Dr. Sarah Kinkel on the Eighteenth-Century British Royal Navy,” *Ctr for Internat’l Maritime Security* (9 July 2018), available online. Kinkel is the author of *Disciplining the Empire: Politics, Governance, and the Rise of the British Navy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2018)—review by Margarete Lincoln at *MiWSR* 2018-103.