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In this elegant little book,¹ tastefully set in Perpetua and lavishly illustrated, Martin Robson (King’s College London) aims to chronicle and assess the Royal Navy’s contribution to Napoleon’s defeat, with special attention to the extraordinary career of Vice Adm. Horatio Lord Nelson, whose death at the Battle of Trafalgar was ever after “portrayed in quasi-religious imagery” (xix). When a durable peace was finally achieved, “it was … largely due to the activities of the Royal Navy over the course of a period longer than the duration of the world wars of the twentieth century combined—and then doubled” (xx). While, Robson acknowledges, no book on the Royal Navy in the age of sail can avoid the long shadow of Trafalgar, he intends to show the navy’s indispensable role in securing Great Britain’s survival, prosperity, and global influence and in shaping its maritime strategy in operations within and far beyond its home waters.

The author means to “broaden the view” (xxi) we have of Royal Navy operations between 1793 and 1815 from an over-concentration on Nelson and Trafalgar to an appreciation of the global scale of the navy’s part in a war that, after all, went on for another ten years (1805–15) after Trafalgar. He hopes to show “not just what the Royal Navy did, but why it was important to British success,” beginning with an explanation of “what exactly the wars were and what they were not about for Britain” (xxi). As a maritime power on the periphery of the European continental system, Britain adopted a strategy in its war against France that was fundamentally defensive yet assertive enough to affect the course of the continental conflict.

That Britain “was at the centre of an Atlantic Empire, encompassing possessions in the West Indies, East Indies and Canada” (3) obliged it to preserve that empire by thwarting any and all of France’s attempts at blue water supremacy. It must contest France’s possession of the Low Countries and its naval presence in the waters off the Scheldt, Rhine, and Maas estuaries, as well as in the Baltic and the Mediterranean. At the same time, the Royal Navy had to protect the distant overseas possessions, particularly in the Caribbean, that generated the commercial and fiscal resources so vital to Britain’s and its allies’ war efforts over the long term.

Robson divides the Royal Navy’s war into two distinct yet interrelated periods: 1793 to 1805, when it wrested dominance at sea from its enemies, and 1805–15, when it capitalized on its naval supremacy to sustain blockades and conduct the attendant maritime operations that so influenced the course of the continental war and the diplomatic settlement following Napoleon’s defeat (4).

The first three chapters, covering events of 1793–1802, focus on the naval threat to British home waters, the Royal Navy’s position in the Mediterranean, and its often heroic operations in defense of its interests in more distant waters as the war with France grew to a global format. Moving on to the events of 1802–15, Robson describes the invasion threat to the British Isles and its elimination at Trafalgar (chapters 4 and 5 respectively). He then examines in some detail naval actions in the Baltic (chap. 6) and in the Mediterranean and as part of the Peninsular War (chap. 7). There follow particularly strong discussions of economic

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2. Where he is a member of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies in the Defence Studies Department. His previous books include *The Battle of Trafalgar* (Haverton, PA: Casemate, 2005) and *Britain, Portugal and South America in the Napoleonic Wars: Alliances and Diplomacy in Economic Maritime Conflict* (NY: I.B. Tauris, 2011). Robson will also write two further volumes of I.B. Tauris’s History of the Royal Navy series: one on the Seven Years’ War (forthcoming Sept 2015), another on the American Revolutionary War.
warfare (chap. 8) and the War of 1812 with the United States (chap. 9). The book features five maps and over fifty illustrations, eight of them in full color, an unexpected boon to scholars in so compact a volume.

Robson is at his best in clarifying the difficulties inherent in conceiving and executing strategic plans. His emphasis on the importance of secondary operations to the results of major engagements is astute and welcome. One example of this is the care taken by Adm. Charles Middleton, Lord Barham, who, as First Lord of the Admiralty with responsibility for Royal Navy fleet dispositions, “was the true architect of the successful outcome of the Trafalgar campaign” (114).

Recognizing that protecting Britain from invasion meant intercepting the French and Spanish fleets off the northwest coast of Spain, Barham placed fifteen ships of the line of the line under Vice Adm. Sir Robert Calder one hundred miles west of Cape Finisterre in hopes of engaging the combined Franco-Spanish fleet under Adm. Pierre-Charles Villeneuve. In the ensuing encounter (in dense fog), Villeneuve’s force of twenty sail-of-the-line became confused and during the chaotic fighting lost more ships and personnel than did Calder, who was later blamed for failing to follow up his initial success. Robson persuasively counters that, in fact,

Calder’s action was the most critical moment of the entire Trafalgar campaign. Although he faced a numerically superior enemy, he had achieved a tactical success with operational and strategic impact. Barham had placed him there to prevent Villeneuve entering the Channel and joining the Brest fleet, an object which Calder clearly achieved. Barham’s mastery of maritime strategy had put an end to Napoleon’s invasion plans. Villeneuve’s decision not to bring about further action with Calder and instead to head south was based on the fact that after crossing the Atlantic to the West Indies and back, then fighting a close-range action against the Royal Navy, his fleet was in a terrible state. (117)

Robson also correctly calls Barham’s fleet deployment a “master class in maritime grand strategy” (114). Oddly, he does not cite here the classic work of Julian Corbett, who praised “Lord Barham and the able admirals who interpreted his plans.” For Corbett, Barham’s tactical decisiveness meant the possibility of massing at the right time and the right place. It meant, in close analogy to strategic deployment on land, the disposal of squadrons about a strategical centre from which fleets could condense for massed action in any required direction, and upon which they could fall back when unduly pressed. In this case the ultimate centre was the narrows of the Channel, where Napoleon’s army lay ready to cross, but there was no massing there. So crude a distribution would have meant a purely defensive attitude. It would have meant waiting to be struck instead of seeking to strike, and such an attitude was arch-heresy to our old masters of war.³

Robson diminishes neither Nelson’s contribution to the Royal Navy’s triumphs nor the effect of Trafalgar on the course of the continuing conflict on sea and land. On the contrary, he stresses that, after Trafalgar, “it was unlikely that Britain would be defeated by France militarily, so it marks the end of the danger that Britain might lose the war” (143). He points out Nelson’s genius for command and shrewd use of pre-battle dinner conferences with his captains in exerting both moral and military leadership:

His intent was not to control and direct his captains but to bring them to his way of thinking, to get them to buy into his vision, by talking through his ideas. This was very different to the autocratic style of the previous generation of admirals such as [George Brydges] Rodney and [John Jervis, 1st Earl of] St. Vincent…. British success was down to superior gunnery, discipline, and seamanship and the aggressive leadership of ships’ captains whose willingness to act on their own initiative had been fostered by Nelson’s desire for them to mutually support each and instilled during those dinner meetings. (124, 140).

The war was far from over in 1805. Trafalgar was followed promptly by Napoleon’s rout of the combined armies of Austria and Russia at Austerlitz. Britain still needed to degrade the French navy as an effective force and prevent neutral warships from falling into French hands. The Royal Navy’s task was complicated by the necessity to carry out operations in remote waters under widely varying circumstances; this required a great deal of sound judgment on the part of individual naval commanders. Adm. James Gambier’s expedi-

tion against Copenhagen in late summer 1807 delivered the whole of the Danish fleet along with twenty thousand tons of naval stores into British hands and began a sustained Royal Navy commitment in the Baltic that lasted until 1812.

By contrast, the approach Adm. James Saumarez, commander of the Baltic fleet in those years, took toward Sweden was mostly diplomatic. After the election of French Marshal Jean Bernadotte as Crown Prince, Sweden, under French pressure to join the Continental system, declared war on Britain. Saumarez correctly saw this as a mere gesture and, accepting Sweden’s assurances to that effect, declined to seize its merchantmen. “Saumarez acted on his own,” Robson notes, “without reference to London, surmising that the continuance of British trade in the region and the supply of naval stores was of paramount importance” (155). In November 1807, Adm. Sir Sidney Smith arrived off Lisbon with a Royal Navy squadron to offer escort for the Portuguese royal family and navy to Brazil just as the French army closed in on the city. “It is worth considering that by using naval diplomacy to prevent the Portuguese fleet falling into French hands, combined with the expeditionary force to seize the Danish fleet, the British had prevented more than 30 ships being added to the French navy, more than Nelson had destroyed at Trafalgar. There was more to seapower than ‘decisive’ battles” (167).

In a book two parts operational history and one part political and economic history, Robson perceptively argues that “as the wellbeing of the British economy was based on trade, insurance and financial services, the requirements to subsidize allies with hard cash and the need to supply British expeditions with the cash to pay their way, the Royal Navy’s role in guaranteeing an uninterrupted flow of specie was one of the most important tasks it fulfilled” (166).

In covering operations from the African Cape to the West and East Indies, Robson identifies the Royal Navy’s two missions as, first, to subsidize and supply allies, and second, to deprive its adversaries of their vulnerable overseas possessions. This is not a new argument, but in some of the book’s strongest passages it is presented with refreshing vigor and cogency. Robson’s discussion of the blockade of the United States in the War of 1812 is compelling on the peculiarities of the conflict and its relevance to the larger, longer struggle with France. The war between two freshwater navies for control of the Great Lakes—effectively inland seas vital to military operations in Upper Canada and the northwestern frontier of the New England states—sparked a naval arms race and led to the Royal Navy’s construction of the shallow-draft first-rater HMS St. Lawrence, which carried greater total firepower (112 guns) than HMS Victory (104 guns).

The blockade of saltwater ports meanwhile had two interrelated objectives: first, confine the small but plucky US Navy and enemy privateers to their ports and thus end the guerre de course (commerce raiding) the Americans practiced in the opening phase of the war; and, second, to interdict US trade and ruin the American economy. “Fundamentally the war in North America was directly related to the war in Europe. Napoleon’s war with Russia undermined one of the foundations of American policy, namely that Britain was reliant on American grain for its campaign in Iberia. With Russia now an ally of Britain, the enormous grain and flour supplies from Northern Europe were once again available to Britain for domestic consumption and for shipping on to Iberia” (210).

A History of the Royal Navy is not without shortcomings. Since the Iberian campaign and the “Spanish ulcer” were so essential to the British army’s erosion of French strength in Europe and demanded such close cooperation between the army and navy, it is disappointing that Robson omits any real discussion of Lord Castlereagh, Secretary of War and later Foreign Secretary, and a consistent advocate of a forceful maritime strategy.4 If it is true that there is more to sea power than decisive battles, it is also true that there is more to war than soldiers and sailors. Castlereagh was an architect of strategy in the Peninsular War and a con-

4 For a good, recent treatment of the critical role played by Castlereagh and his rival George Canning in developing and sustaining British strategy, see Peter Padfield, Maritime Power and the Struggle for Freedom: Naval Campaigns That Shaped the Modern World, 1788-1851 (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Pr, 2005) 259. See also Noël Mostert, who notes that Castlereagh “had taken it upon himself to counteract any belief that after Trafalgar a sense of urgency no longer attached to the navy and its role”—The Line upon a Wind: The Great War at Sea, 1793-1815 (NY: Norton, 2008) 575.
sistent supporter of Wellington’s conduct of it. Yet Castlereagh appears only fleetingly in Robson’s conclusion (233) when he rightly stresses the force that the Royal Navy lent to Britain’s voice at the Congress of Vienna. That was the voice of Castlereagh, who, together with Canning, had done much to articulate what British strategy was—and was not—and who had so artfully brought naval and maritime power to bear on the continental conflict. These statesmen’s influential conception of British interests deserves more notice than Robson has given it. Nelson and Wellington had first met, after all, in the waiting room of Castlereagh’s office. A less serious flaw is the absence of some treatment, perhaps in a final chapter or conclusion, of the legacy of the Royal Navy’s travails in the Napoleonic era and its effect on British maritime strategy later in the nineteenth century.

These, however, are minor defects in a superb work of integrative scholarship filled with clear thinking about British war aims and the peace dividends of the Napoleonic era.

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