



A History of the Royal Navy: The Seven Years War by Martin Robson.

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At 12 Mr. Byng was shot dead by 6 Marines and put into his coffin.

This log entry from HMS *Monarch* (14 Mar. 1757) opens a succinct narrative of the naval side of Britain's first global war with the first and last execution of an admiral under the Royal Navy's harsh Articles of War.

Adm. Sir John Byng had been sent to the Mediterranean with a substantial fleet at the outset of Seven Years War, after a long-simmering period of undeclared hostilities in which he had served creditably. His objective was to relieve the British garrison on Minorca, for nearly fifty years a major Royal Navy base, now besieged by a French army supported by a fleet equal in strength to Byng's. When the two fleets clashed, Byng allowed the French to batter the van of his fleet, while his flagship and the rest of the British line failed to support it. The outcome was indecisive: no ships were lost on either side and casualties were about equal; nonetheless, Byng, with the concurrence of his captains at a council of war, cravenly chose to retire to Gibraltar,¹ where he was reinforced by several more ships of the line. But, before he could put to sea again, the Minorca garrison capitulated and Byng was ordered home to face a court-martial. Convicted of failing to "do his utmost" to engage the enemy, he was sentenced to death without any mitigating language—"or such other punishment"—that might have allowed the panel of judges to exercise some discretion. Many appeals for a royal pardon were scuttled by the acrimony between the King and the Parliamentary leader, William Pitt the Elder, and the sentence was carried out.

This sad event marked the nadir of the Navy's fortunes in an often overlooked conflict, known in North America as the "French and Indian War." Historian Martin Robson (Exeter Univ.) has now written a direct and spare narrative history of the Royal Navy in the Seven Years War,² tightly focused on events, battles, and leaders, with only a little discussion of the essentials of the political context.³ For those who grew up, like me, under the spell of C.S. Forester and Patrick O'Brian, reading this book will be like coming home.

The Seven Years War represents a peculiarly British blend of commercial interests and geostrategic military goals, which Robson captures in a quotation of a letter by Lord Holderness, Secretary of State for the Northern Department (i.e., European affairs) to the British envoy to Prussia: "we must be merchants while we are soldiers; that our trade depends upon a proper exertion of our Maritime strength;

1. A decision opposed only by Capt. the Hon. Augustus Hervey, ironically one of Byng's strongest supporters during and after his court-martial as well as his longtime protégé and friend. For his engaging diary, never intended for publication, see David Erskine, ed., *Augustus Hervey's Journal: Being the Intimate Account of the Life of a Captain in the Royal Navy Ashore and Afloat, 1746-1759* (London: W. Kimber, 1953); it is a compelling self-portrait of an eighteenth-century cosmopolitan aristocrat and libertine who was also an aggressive, competent naval officer.

2. A worthy second installment in the "History of the Royal Navy" series being jointly produced by I.B. Tauris and the National Museum of the Royal Navy.

3. An important book that complements Robson's is N.A.M. Rodger's *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (1986; rpt. NY: Norton, 1996).

that trade and Maritime force depend upon each other; and that the Riches, which are the true resources of this Country, depend chiefly upon its Commerce” (52).

Britain’s strategic emphasis on its navy overshadowed its three great land victories of the war, in India (Plassey, 23 June 1757), northern Europe (Minden, 1 Aug. 1759), and North America (Quebec, 13 Sept. 1759). Robson shows that the Royal Navy facilitated all three victories.

The dispute between King George II and William Pitt, besides ensuring Byng’s execution, was the only complicating factor in Britain’s maritime strategy during the war. George II was also the Elector of Hanover, a small principality dear to the king’s heart that posed a tempting target for the French, who readily perceived its value as a potential postwar bargaining chip in the very likely event that the British were to capture any of France’s overseas colonial possessions. Though the fighting on the mainland of Europe was an unwelcome distraction for Parliament, the relatively small English troop deployment there was ably backed up by the Royal Navy, which conducted an effective blockade and riverine operations in northern Germany, enabling England to keep its grip on Hanover.

In his introduction, Robson sets the stage for a war prompted by the British government’s inability to check the extension of French influence in North America, including the seemingly inexorable French advance into the Ohio Valley. The British hoped to keep that festering conflict separate from the European disputes that more directly threatened to trigger war between England and France. Leading politicians like the Secretary of State Lord Newcastle, Lord Hardwicke, and First Minister Pitt shared a belief that sound strategy dictated increasing the size of the Royal Navy and deploying it against France’s seaborne commerce, thus preventing the French Navy from mounting a credible challenge to the Royal Navy.

Leaping from continent to continent, Robson depicts a Royal Navy led by admirals, commodores, and captains who combined professional competence with unusually aggressive natures, perhaps encouraged (as Voltaire noted⁴) by the horrifying example of Byng’s execution. The long period of prewar Anglo-French hostilities had seen British failures by land (e.g., Gen. Edward Braddock’s defeat and the reverses suffered by the Duke of Cumberland’s small army in northern Germany) and some setbacks at sea. Robson astutely notes that these were offset by the quiet, unglamorous feats of Britain’s most critical military asset—the Western Squadron—which patrolled the entrance to the English Channel and made frequent sweeps into the Bay of Biscay and the waters off Ushant. “If [Adm. Sir Edward] Hawke [commanding the Western Squadron] could get to sea he could start seizing French sailors, reducing the pool of experienced seamen available to the French navy” (18). In fact, during two years, this fleet captured hundreds of French merchant ships heading to or from the great seaport of Brest, thus depriving the French Navy of thousands of trained seamen and preventing it from matching the Royal Navy. Even Admiral Byng played a role in this neglected phase of the Seven Years War: briefly replacing Hawke in command of the Western Squadron in 1755, he captured many French ships.

While many regard the Napoleonic Wars as the apogee of British naval supremacy, the Seven Years War was very much a high point for the Royal Navy, featuring as it did numerous examples of professionalism unmatched by any other European naval power. Though there was only one decisive fleet action—Hawke’s great victory under impossible conditions at Quiberon Bay (20 Nov. 1759)—the war witnessed the implementing of a coherent, effective maritime strategy, brilliantly executed amphibious operations, and nearly flawless coordination between naval officers and their army colleagues. In North America, Adm. Edward Boscawen’s siege and capture of Louisburg on Cape Breton Island in 1758 and the climactic capture of Quebec the next year, made possible by Adm. Sir Charles

4. Voltaire, *Candide*, chap. 23: “mais dans ce pays-ci il est bon de tuer de temps en temps un amiral pour encourager les autres.”

Saunders's aggressive push up the uncharted St. Lawrence River, were among the fruits of this inter-service cooperation. Even the failure of Hawke's amphibious descent (after exemplary preparatory operations) on Rochefort in 1757 was caused only by the Army commander's last minute failure of nerve. Adm. Sir George Pocock's brilliant assault on and capture of Havana in 1762, putting intolerable pressure on France's main ally, Spain, capped off the string of impressive joint operations during the war.

Robson also details the less dazzling coastal and riverine expeditions by small British squadrons in northern European waters and the achievement of Royal Navy and East India Company ships in pushing back the French on both sides of the Indian subcontinent; this made possible both Robert Clive's famous victory at Plassey and the forgotten naval expeditions that captured valuable French colonial possessions on the west coast of Africa.

By the late 1750s, France in desperation seriously considered a risky ploy that might, at a stroke, put England on the defensive: an invasion of the British Isles. An army was assembled, ships were collected at various ports, and plans were made by French strategists to put forces ashore—Scotland was regarded as a good target. But the French Navy, crippled by manpower losses sustained in battle and through attrition in costly transatlantic operations could muster neither the men nor the capital ships needed for such a daring operation. "The fundamental problem for the French was trying to launch an invasion across an uncommanded sea" (109).

An attempt by the Toulon squadron to sneak through the Straits of Gibraltar and join French fleets along the Atlantic coast was forestalled by Boscawen's victory at Lagos. Meanwhile, the Western Squadron's improved victualling and logistical support allowed it to exert relentless pressure on the key French base at Brest. When the Brest fleet, under Admiral Conflans, tried to take advantage of the terrible weather of November 1759 to elude the Western Squadron and sail south and east along the coast of Brittany and rendezvous with smaller squadrons along the Biscay coast, Hawke pursued it into the unsheltered waters of Quiberon Bay with a new and risky tactical approach:

When Hawke's flagship signaled to "engage," he would also haul down the signal for line of battle. That would, he hoped, continue to allow ships to continue engaging their nearest enemy until they were captured, sunk or destroyed. After that captains were to look for opportunities to assist their colleagues ahead or astern. It was a simple plan designed to bring on a close-range action. (133)

Thus Hawke prefigured "the Nelson touch" by nearly forty years. Quiberon Bay and its aftermath cost the French fifteen ships of the line and permanently ended their threat of invading the British Isles.

While Sir Edward Hawke's name is deservedly enshrined in the pantheon of British naval heroes, many other officers who distinguished themselves in the Seven Years War have slipped into obscurity—Boscawen, Pocock, Saunders, Charles Holmes, Augustus Keppel, and Hervey, to name just a few. Martin Robson's welcome, concise, and instructive book will acquaint or reacquaint readers with the illustrious history of the Royal Navy forged by such men in the epic age of sail.