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Playing at command: midshipmen and quarterdeck boys in the Royal Navy, 1793-1815

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PLAYING AT COMMAND:
MIDSHIPMEN AND QUARTERDECK BOYS
IN THE ROYAL NAVY, 1793-1815

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Tables	iv
Abstract	v
Introduction	1
Two Critical Events for the Georgian Navy	4
Testing Social Theories Using the Royal Navy Model	8
Identifying the Quarterdeck Boy	16
The Midshipman’s Lot	21
 Part I – Selecting Young Gentlemen for Sea Service	
Noble Rot	27
Changing Selection	28
Sobriety, Diligence, and Qualifications - The Ideal Young Gentleman	34
Connections, Interest, and Patronage	35
The Three “Rs”	39
Temperament, Conduct, and the Appearance of a Gentleman	44
Summary	50
 Part II – The Authority of Quarterdeck Boys	
The Evolution of Naval Authority in the Eighteenth Century	53
Quarterdeck Boys as a Measure of Change	57
Internal Sources of Authority	
The Admiralty	58
Captains	60
The Lower Deck	64
The Rogue’s March	71
The Breakdown of Naval Subordination	73
External Sources of Authority	
Religion	78
Politics	81
Education	88
 Conclusion	92
 Bibliography	97
 Appendix A: Honorable Lieutenants Passed by Year, per <i>Steel’s Navy List</i>	105
Appendix B: Honorable Quarterdeck Boys of the Battle of Trafalgar, 1805	106
Appendix C: Honorable Quarterdeck Boys of the Battle of Quiberon Bay, 1759	107

Appendix D: Lieutenant's Passing Certificates, 1759, 1805, 1814. 108
Vita. 109

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
1. Ratios of Quarterdeck Boys to Total Complements, 1759.	17
2. Ratios of Quarterdeck Boys to Total Complements, 1805.	18
3. Royal Navy Fleets by Year.	33

ABSTRACT

The golden age of the Royal Navy, which saw its apotheosis at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, also presented one of the great paradoxes of modern naval organization. “Young gentlemen,” some as young as eight or nine, were placed in positions of authority aboard His Majesty’s ships and expected to command veteran mariners with decades of sea experience. The effectiveness of this system, and the continued success of the Royal Navy as an institution, tended to belie the obvious disadvantages of placing adolescent recruits on the quarterdecks of active men-of-war.

This study examines two aspects of the process that allowed midshipmen and quarterdeck boys to function within the shipboard hierarchy and offers explanation by way of J. C. D. Clark’s theory of a persistent *ancien régime* mentality in English society.

Part I examines the selection of boys destined for command. A trend that began in the late 1770s saw a dramatic increase in the number of “Honorable” boys, those with significant social and or political “interest”, entering the service. Many senior officers lamented the preferential treatment granted these young notables and its deleterious effect on subordination. Within the context of Clark’s theory of a “patrician hegemony,” the desirability of a naval career during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars meant that, increasingly, opportunities benefited the elite. The natural authority granted by birth was also widely accepted by the men of the lower deck, despite social unrest stirring in France and the effects of the Great Mutinies of 1797.

Part II looks at the sources of a young gentleman’s authority. Those institutions, both naval and civilian, that granted young gentlemen their practical and theoretical status as officers-in-training, also reinforced the structure of the old order.

The increasing social status of young gentlemen in the Royal Navy of the Great Wars and the processes that maintained their authority reflected wider social and cultural trends – developments that confirmed the view of Georgian England as an *ancien régime*.

INTRODUCTION

In 1800 Midshipman Lord William Fitzroy, fourth son of the Duke of Grafton, passed his examination for lieutenant and entered the ranks of the Royal Navy's commissioned officers. Though only eighteen, a full two years shy of the minimum age required to become a lieutenant, Fitzroy's political and social interest superceded Admiralty regulations and propelled his career forward. Rapid promotion continued and Fitzroy received his step to post captain in 1804.¹ A series of uneventful commands did not prevent Fitzroy's appointment to the new, thirty-eight gun frigate HMS *Macedonian* in 1810. As "plum" an appointment as the Royal Navy could offer at the time, *Macedonian* represented the opportunity for independent cruising in the increasingly hostile American shipping lanes. She also presented Fitzroy his best chance of making prizes from the vastly reduced fleet of French merchantmen plying the Atlantic trade in the wake of Trafalgar. *Macedonian's* newly completed crew of more than three hundred mariners and Royal Marines experienced a taste of Fitzroy's temperament with the enforcement of his first standing order that required the men address him as "my Lord" rather than "Captain." Fitzroy's next order condemned a seaman to forty-eight lashes for "the very sailor like offense of getting drunk,"² a sentence four times the standard punishment traditionally allowed a captain outside a court martial. By March 1811 Fitzroy stood before his own court martial facing charges brought by *Macedonian's* sailing master who accused him of falsifying expense reports on ship's stores and

¹ The National Archives of the UK (TNA): Public Records Office (PRO) Reference Books 359.3 ADB, *Steel's Navy List*, December, 1801.

² Samuel Leech, *Thirty Years from Home; or, a Voice from the Main Deck* (London: H. G. Collins, 1851), p. 27.

profiting from the difference. The findings of the Admiralty court, however, focused on Fitzroy's brutality towards the men as much as the charges of fraud, citing "False Expense of Stores – Tyranny and Oppression" as the basis for his dismissal from the service.³ Five months later, Fitzroy reappeared in the navy list, fully reinstated without loss of seniority. Political and social weight had, once again, intervened in Fitzroy's favor, proving that connections could trump Admiralty law, even when that law supported the best interests of the service. Despite Fitzroy's public flouting of naval authority, he continued to profit from the Royal Navy's rigid system of promotion. Beyond the rank of post captain, seniority alone controlled advancement and elevation to flag rank. Although discreetly denied active command after 1811, Fitzroy progressed inevitably up the naval ladder, becoming an admiral and drawing an admiral's pay until his death in 1857.

Fitzroy's story reflects two important trends evident in the Royal Navy during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. First, it exemplifies the increasing weight ascribed to aristocratic and political connections in both the selection of young officers for sea service and the pace of their promotion. Second, it reveals a growing concern on the part of the Admiralty for the treatment of seamen whose protests commanded greater attention in the wake of the 1797 mutinies.

In the years after the Peace of Amiens, high-ranking contemporaries including First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl St. Vincent and Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, Viscount Horatio Nelson, voiced their concerns for the influx of aristocratic and politically-favored boys into the service. Their concerns addressed the issue of social precedence and its corrosive effects on naval professionalism. They

³ TNA: PRO ADM12/27D, "Black Book," Vol. III, 1807-1815.

understood too, that the root of the problem lay with the entry-level quarterdeck ranks – with those boys who entered the service, typically between the ages of nine and nineteen, with the express aim of becoming sea officers. Known officially as “young gentlemen,” this title encompassed a variety of epithets that fell in and out of favor during the course of the Great Wars. Midshipman, Captain’s Servant, Volunteer First Class, Boy First Class, were all used to indicate boys being groomed for command. While N. A. M. Rodger argues that “the eighteenth century Admiralty had almost no control over the recruitment of its officers,”⁴ something changed during the course of the French Revolutionary Wars such that the 1803 mobilization saw nearly four times as many “Honorable” midshipmen, that is the sons of baronets or higher, pass the examination for lieutenant than during the 1793 mobilization.⁵ While a “strong middle-class element”⁶ continued to flourish in the navy’s corps of junior officers, the sons of noblemen and high-ranking gentlemen represented a rapidly growing minority during the Great Wars.

Synchronous to this trend were broadening concerns for the treatment of seamen. The fleet-wide mutinies of 1797 highlighted the potential for anarchy, if not in the minds of mariners then in the consciousness of officers whose numbers represented a tiny portion of the complement of any man-of-war. The precariousness of the social structure that sustained the power of the quarterdeck had become all too clear. Officers who brutalized seamen without justification felt the wrath of an Admiralty keen to avoid further uprisings from the lower deck. For midshipmen and quarterdeck boys, the

⁴ N. A. M. Rodger, “Officers, Gentlemen and their Education, 1793-1860,” in *Les Empires en Guerre et Paix, Journées Franco-Anglais d’Histoire de la Marine, Portsmouth, 23-36 Mars, 1988*, ed. Edward Freeman (Vincennes, France: Service Historique de la Marine, 1990), p. 139.

⁵ TNA: PRO Ref. Bks. 359.3 ADB, *Steel’s Navy List, 1794-1815*. See Appendix A.

⁶ Michael Lewis, *A Social History of the Navy, 1793-1815* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), p. xii.

curtailing of disrespectful or unnecessarily authoritarian behavior took different forms, all of which tended to limit their authority.

The apparently conflicting social dynamics that produced a more aristocratic and gentlemanly midshipman's berth and at the same time hobbled its authoritative status provide the two thematic approaches for this study. The factors that produced these shifts, whether internal or external to the Royal Navy, offer a key to understanding developments in the attitudes of both the Admiralty and the men of George III's navy. The general trends apparent within the service also present a microcosmic view of wider patterns in English society at large during the Great Wars.

Two Critical Events for the Georgian Navy

A direct correlation can be drawn between the rising social status of a naval career and the level of political and social interference in the appointment of young gentlemen. The decision to take a boy to sea as an officer-in-training traditionally resided with individual captains; however, the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries saw a variety of pressures intrude upon that prerogative. During Pepysian days when a naval career ranked among the lowliest, least-desirable of professions, the Royal Navy and her commanders enjoyed a substantial measure of operational independence, distanced as they were from the kinds of political and social influences so prevalent in army recruitment and promotion. As Pepys noted in his *Naval Minutes*, "have any of our Heralds allowed in express words the seaman for a gentleman?"⁷

During the last quarter of the seventeenth century, royal attempts to correct this situation led to a greater separation between "gentlemen" and "tarpaulin officers," those

⁷ Samuel Pepys, *Naval Minutes*, quoted in Geoffrey Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society, 1680-1730* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), p. 275.

of humble origin raised from the lower deck as thorough-going professionals. The emergence of King's Letter Boys or volunteers per order, genteel young recruits seeking a naval career, represented the political push to create a new corps of well-bred *and* professional officers. But the effort begun during the reign of Charles II had gained only a little momentum by that of George I and a "pronounced 'social mix' in the commissioned ranks of the Royal Navy" remained a prominent feature of naval life.⁸ The process of stereotyping young officers according to their lowest common social denominator continued well into the last quarter of the eighteenth century, bolstered by the fact that in the "unnatural world" of the Royal Navy, "the order of civil society was subverted."⁹ Distinctions of dress, accommodation, diet, and most importantly, the deference afforded by noble birth, blurred in the dank confines of the midshipman's berth and upon that great social leveler, the quarterdeck. Aboard a man-of-war, naval rank superceded social rank. Between the American and French Revolutionary Wars, however, the equation began to change.

The first important event to affect general opinions of a naval career occurred in 1779 when George III sent his third son, Prince William Henry, to sea as a midshipman with the instructions, "the young man goes as a sailor, and as such, I add again, no marks of distinction are to be shown unto him; they would destroy my whole plan."¹⁰ Exactly what this plan might have been is open to speculation. As the first Hanoverian to proclaim himself an Englishman first and foremost, George's commitment of a son to the sea service tendered proof of his patriotic zeal. It also reflected a belief in the need for

⁸ Holmes, *Augustan*, p. 276.

⁹ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 392.

¹⁰ King George III to Sir S. Hood, June 11, 1779, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 388.

princes to acquire first-hand knowledge of naval and military institutions, as prerequisites for informed and empathic leadership. The decision was, however, a “socially radical, even revolutionary”¹¹ step which instantly improved public perceptions of the Royal Navy and elevated its officers to an unprecedented level of social acceptability. In the following decades, the rising social status of officers in the Royal Navy encouraged the sons (not always the younger) of aristocratic families (not always impoverished) to seek positions as young gentlemen aboard men-of-war. Yearly editions of *Steel’s Navy List* from the French Revolutionary Wars show an increasing number of “Honorable” midshipmen becoming lieutenants, indicating the growing popularity of a naval career. For the French Revolutionary Wars, this trend peaked in 1797,¹² the year of the illustrious Battle of Cape St. Vincent for which Sir John Jervis earned his eponymous earldom and Nelson rose to international fame.

1797 also marked the second great watershed for social dynamics within the Royal Navy. A series of mutinies beginning with the Channel Fleet at Spithead, followed by ships stationed at the Nore, then by the North Sea Squadron at Yarmouth, sent shockwaves through naval command, rudely reminding both the Admiralty and Parliament that order depended entirely on the consent of the seamen who worked their ships.

These two events affected both internal and external perceptions of the Royal Navy and forced senior officers to reevaluate their methods and their men in order to preserve discipline as much as the functionality of the service. Disdain for young, aristocratic incompetents like Lord William Fitzroy mounted, prompting St. Vincent to

¹¹ Rodger, *Command*, p. 388.

¹² See Appendix A, “Honorable Lieutenants Passed by Year, per *Steel’s Navy List*.”

remark in 1806 that “this vast overflow of young nobility in the Service makes rapid strides to the decay of Seamanship, as well as Subordination. . . .”¹³ St. Vincent’s concerns for the professionalism of officers and the maintenance of discipline and order aboard ship summarized two of the crucial issues involving midshipmen and quarterdeck boys during the Great Wars.

Part I of this study addresses the selection of officers-in-training between 1793 and 1815 and indicates the extent to which wider social, political, and cultural trends infiltrated the Royal Navy and encroached upon the independence of captains in their selection of young gentlemen destined for command. The result of such intervention was a mounting tension between sea officers who originated from the “middling ranks”¹⁴ of society and a corps of aristocratic young gentlemen whose influence confused the line between social and naval subordination.

Part II addresses the concern voiced by Lord St. Vincent and other senior officials for the professionalism of future naval officers. Over the course of the Great Wars the nature of the authority wielded by young gentlemen changed in order to remedy abuses and as a response to the new social dynamic between lower deck and quarterdeck. The cultural and institutional constructs that enabled inexperienced boys to command veteran able seamen altered subtly as a result of the 1797 mutinies. Internal sources of authority generated by a ship’s captain, and ultimately by Admiralty law, were also tempered by external influences such as revolutionary political and social instability, education, and

¹³ The Earl St. Vincent to Benjamin Tucker, Esq., HMS *Hibernia* off Ushant, March 17, 1806, in Jedediah S. Tucker, ed. *Memoirs of the Right Honourable the Earl St. Vincent G.C.B. etc.*, Vol. II (London: Richard Bentley, 1844), p. 270.

¹⁴ Contemporaries preferred “middling sort” or “middling rank” to the term “middle class”, which came into use in the 1790s. Its members did not like to think of themselves belonging to a rigid social strata implied by the word “class.” See Langford, *Polite*, p. 61.

religion. Both sets of influences produced occasionally conflicting results, at times limiting and at times reinforcing the authority of midshipmen and quarterdeck boys.

While signs of a changing social equation within Britain in the last decade of the eighteenth century appeared in the altered character of a petty officer's authority, an increasingly aristocratic midshipman's berth and a narrowing field of selection for entry-level officers reflected wider social and political currents that, in fact, supported the maintenance of an *ancien régime* in British society. The conflict inherent in the position of the quarterdeck boy embodied the dueling forces within the Royal Navy and within society at large – between old-order traditions and social mobility. The ability of the service to absorb the effects of both and to emerge as a strong, professional institution that flourished late into the nineteenth century provides evidence of the flexibility and resilience of the Royal Navy as a sub-culture of Georgian society.

Testing Social Theories Using the Royal Navy Model

Characterizations of English society as either a “dynamic state” or an “old order” draw principally on the works of two scholars with opposing views on the nature of eighteenth-century society. Paul Langford challenges all notions of stability, classifying the long eighteenth century as a period of massive and universal change. Expanding on the contemporary view that agricultural and industrial developments “wrought a fundamental alteration in the English people,”¹⁵ Langford focuses on the growing middle classes and their pursuit of “polite” status in all its forms including wealth, social rank, and political power as the catalyst for social evolution. The idea that “the debasement of

¹⁵ John Andrews, quoted in Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People, England 1727-1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 679.

gentility is one of the clearest signs of social change,”¹⁶ became manifest in the operational standards of the Royal Navy of the early-eighteenth century. Here was an institution that effectively opened professional opportunities to boys of the lower to middling orders. From the 1730s until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Royal Navy command represented a largely unchallenged meritocracy and one of the best enablers of social mobility. The impartial handling of midshipmen who originated from a broad spectrum of social ranks reflected the navy’s disregard for traditional social hierarchies in its command structure. It also reflected the Admiralty’s recognition of the need to build an officer corps based on ability and skill. According to Langford, by the close of the eighteenth century, the broadening middle classes, which included even modest artisans and producers of commercial goods, represented an “increased threat to traditional notions of a hierarchical society.”¹⁷ Young naval officers elevated from humble backgrounds only contributed to that threat.

A culture of freedom and mobility, influenced by the liberalism of Romantic radicals, found support from opposition Whigs and Dissenting ministers who touted the constitutional “rights of Englishmen,” applicable to all regardless of social rank. The Royal Navy’s appreciation of democratic principles sharpened in the wake of fleet-wide mutiny, an event that sparked a new social conscience among officers whose vulnerability had become all too obvious. In the first decade of the new century Captain Alexander Ball noted that “no body of men can for any length of time be safely treated otherwise than as rational beings. . . .” Midshipmen who attacked these “newly

¹⁶ Langford, *Polite*, p. 66.

¹⁷ Paul Langford, ed., *The Eighteenth Century, 1688-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 14.

rational”¹⁸ mariners, either physically or verbally without sufficient justification, found themselves whipped, mastheaded, disgraced, or dismissed from the service.

The relationship between lower deck and quarterdeck altered as the new balance of power within the Royal Navy forced officers to confront the old precept of rule by consent. More humane approaches to the management of crews and the fostering of patriotic fervor amongst the lower deck echoed elements of a dynamic social equation and the transmutation of democratic revolutionary ideology into a far safer form – that of enlightened nationalism. In these developments the Royal Navy example supports Langford’s theory of sweeping social change. But while change undoubtedly occurred over the course of the long eighteenth century, its manifestations both within the Admiralty and aboard its men-of-war diverge from Langford’s unidirectional model of social progress.

In contrast to Langford, J. C. D. Clark champions the notion of England as an *ancien régime*. Clark argued that throughout the Great Wars, England remained a “pre-industrial,” “aristocratic,” “confessional state,” in which the twin foundations of society – law and religion – maintained a state of “patrician hegemony” over a broad social spectrum. While this diversity spurred conflict, from socio-economic discord to religious upheavals, Clark argues that the ability of English society to absorb these shocks, to settle on middle ground, and to assimilate rather than revolt grew from a fundamental social consensus: that the dominance of the patrician elite was justified by laws both natural and revealed.¹⁹ Clark acknowledges that by the close of the eighteenth century, “some degree of mobility into (and out of) the patrician elite was possible in England,” an observation

¹⁸ Captain Alexander Ball and Captain Anselm Griffiths, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 491.

¹⁹ J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Régime*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 15, 17, 25, 35-36.

that broadens his definition of “aristocracy” to include members of the gentry who possessed significant political and financial clout.²⁰ Clark’s argument, that “contemporary perceptions of the power and influence of the nobility and gentry were legion,” builds upon the social theories of David Hume who understood that true authority could not be “imposed by deception or force” but depended “on the willingness of the many to obey the few because they saw in the few a certain embodiment of their aspirations.”²¹

In naval terms, Clark’s model is supported by traditional notions of a rigid shipboard hierarchy, whereby every man minded his place, and honored the system of ranks and privileges out of a combination of duty and resignation, hope and tradition. During the Great Wars, the increasing number of midshipman’s appointments granted on the basis of noble birth and/or political influence also supported the notion of an ascendant elite. In the last decades of the eighteenth century selection favoring those with social rank, parliamentary favor, or at the very least, connections to a high-ranking naval officer, superceded the navy’s position as an open meritocracy and thus reflected a renewed state of patrician hegemony in naval command. N. A. M. Rodger relates this trend to a reaction against the revolutionary ideas circulating in the wake of regicide in France: “just as the French navy abandoned its tradition of choosing officers from the nobility in favour of the career open to talent, the British Navy started moving in the opposite direction.”²²

The widening gap between quarterdeck and lower deck which, by 1815, looked more like a chasm, supports Clark’s theory of a dominant patrician element. While the

²⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 35, 24.

²² Rodger, *Command*, p. 508.

particulars of shipboard society evolved during the late 1790s, the general hierarchy remained, becoming more firmly rooted in traditional social systems with each new generation of notable Royal Navy recruits. It is undeniable that, by the turn of the nineteenth century, the relationship between officers and men depended more heavily on expectations of professionalism and mutually respectful conduct; however, the old codes of paternalism and deference within shipboard society remained firm. With the new century, the Royal Navy came to mirror the social make-up of a greater patrician society, one in which birth, political connections, and/or wealth determined opportunities for advancement.

Complications arose, however, with the influx of young officers whose appointments and promotions came primarily as the result of “interest”. A process of advancement that subordinated skill, motivation, or instinct for command to qualifications of birth and connection threatened the implicit contract of professionalism between officers and seamen. Unworthy junior officers were hardly revered by mariners and subsequently struggled to maintain real authority. From the quarterdeck perspective, reassertion of the old social order wrought havoc on the chain of command. By the start of the Napoleonic Wars, the pressure on captains to take up aristocratic boys who were not cut out for naval life increased. Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood complained of one noble youth aboard his flagship: “. . . he is of no more use here as an officer than Bounce is, and not near so entertaining.”²³ Bounce was Collingwood’s dog. While it did not necessarily follow that all aristocratic boys lacked talent, or a real desire to serve at sea,

²³ Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood to Lady Collingwood, HMS *Ocean* off Cadiz, July 28, 1808, in G. L. Newnham Collingwood, *A Selection from the Public and Private Correspondence of Vice-Admiral Lord Collingwood: Interspersed with Memoirs of his Life*, Second Edition, Vol. II (London: James Ridgway, 1828), pp. 198-99.

the problems raised by the presence of socially-superior boys aboard Georgian men-of-war posed a serious threat to the effectiveness of naval subordination. Officers of less exalted status than Collingwood often moderated disciplinary measures against the sons of notables, aware that in the prevailing political climate, their actions might receive career-damaging censure. As shown in Part II of this study, lieutenants directly in charge of quarterdeck boys became particularly conscious of whose interest their juniors represented, as promotion to commander and post captain relied, to a large extent, on the political favor of the Admiralty. In this way, the gentrification of the midshipman's berth threatened the professionalism of the quarterdeck and justified concerns for the future of naval seamanship.

The Royal Navy's ability to avoid destruction from competing internal and external forces – from political influences on appointments, to social tensions affecting shipboard hierarchies and the distribution of authority – is best explained using Clark's concept of assimilation, whereby social tensions were absorbed into a system based on patrician hegemony. Roy Porter supports Clark's notions of "elasticity" and "resilience" in English social hierarchies as they reinforced the old order. Such qualities emphasized the fact that while English society was "inegalitarian and oozing privilege . . . it was neither brittle nor rigid."²⁴ It is a description that accurately characterizes the naval command structure.

The precedence given to boys with aristocratic and political influence, at the expense of open entry and rewards based principally on merit, did not substantially impede the Admiralty's ability to maintain operational effectiveness throughout the Great

²⁴ Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, Revised Edition (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. xiii, 4, 340-41.

Wars. The manoeuvring of aristocratic young gentlemen, often through promotion into less crucial roles, as in the case of Lord William Fitzroy, provided a respectable yet effective outlet for young men unsuited to sea command. For those who remained afloat, the paternalistic duty that demanded expertise and infallibility from superiors echoed the expanding reputation of the service. The decisive and popular victory at Trafalgar in 1805 pressured junior officers to shape up, spurred by the threat of public ignominy and professional humiliation if their conduct failed to meet expectations.

While elements of Langford's theory of social dynamics appear relevant to the 1797 mutinies and the more humane handling of seamen that resulted, interpretations of old-order utilitarian motivations are equally apparent on either side of the 1797 uprisings. The failure of the Admiralty to fulfill its basic duty of sustaining the health and welfare of its seamen collided with the need to keep mariners contented if the Royal Navy's fleets were to remain functional. Mutual need uncovered middle ground and the opportunity for conciliation within the existing social and institutional structure. Mariners' appreciation for strong and effective command did not dwindle with the institution of more restrained approaches to authority and the use of discipline. The professional pride of lower-deck men tended, in fact, to favor the type of authoritative command that conducted a "tight ship."²⁵ Such attitudes only reinforced the old shipboard hierarchies. Demands for a higher level of professionalism from the quarterdeck encouraged even greater separation between officers and their men, providing further evidence of Clark's social *ancien régime*.

Langford's vision of an increasingly open English society driven by merit might appear more relevant to the reduction of the navy at the close of the Napoleonic Wars.

²⁵ Rodger, *Command*, p. 493.

The process of paying off hundreds of ships and beaching thousands of young officers allowed the Admiralty to keep only the cream of career officers and those who thrived on the new dynamics of shipboard life. Yet, the lasting effects of officer gentrification on the navy of the mid to late-nineteenth century favor Clark's explanation of a continuing patrician hegemony. Rodger acknowledges the social polarization of lower deck "commoners" and quarterdeck "gentlemen", a phenomenon that became glaringly apparent by 1815.²⁶ Aristocratic and political demand saw a greater number of positions for boys diverted to the sons of the elite, producing, by the end of the Napoleonic Wars, a more socially homogeneous officer corps than had existed at the close of the Seven Years' War.²⁷

Rodger emphasizes a vision of the Royal Navy as a microcosm of English society, reflecting wider trends and developments that took place in the long eighteenth century: ". . . for all its undoubted peculiarities, the Navy resembled the society from which it was recruited in many more ways than it differed from it."²⁸ While Paul Langford's dynamic state describes the naval example up until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the evolutions of the 1790s through the 1810s reveal limitations in the application of his theory. As the quarterdeck increasingly became the realm of the gentleman, Clark's notion of a patrician ascendancy more accurately represents the developments taking place in George III's Navy. Resilience and flexibility within a traditional social hierarchy characterized the naval institution of the nineteenth century, allowing it to survive the strains of complex social and political times.

²⁶ Rodger, "Officers," p. 140.

²⁷ Lewis, *Social*, p. 177, and Rodger, *Command*, p. 527.

²⁸ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World, Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: W. W. Norton, 1996), pp. 14, 345.

Clark notes evolutions within the “hegemonic set of ideas which provided the ideological framework within which the changes happened.” It was an *ancien régime* that embraced fluctuations in the social order (eschewing notions of stasis) to produce a state that represented “hegemony rather than consensus.” The social changes that took place in the Royal Navy of the Great Wars support the conclusion that “‘modernity’ did not mean the end of ‘Old England’.”²⁹ The application of Clark’s theory to the changing processes of selection and to evolutions in the authority of midshipmen and quarterdeck boys provides the framework for this study.

Identifying the Quarterdeck Boy

Michael Lewis’ definition of “quarterdeck” boy as opposed to “lower deck” boy is useful in broadly identifying the difference between young men who possessed a good chance of attaining commissioned status and those whose highest aspiration might be that of able seaman or, at best, warrant officer (gunner, carpenter, boatswain, coxswain, steward, or sailing master). It also eliminates problems created by the changing conventions and rating systems that spanned the period under consideration. Before 1794 the most popular form of entry for quarterdeck boys was as “captain’s servant.” Despite the implications, there was nothing menial about the position. Captain’s servants were quarterdeck protégés, officers in the making, for whom the assignment of servile duties would have represented a serious insult and demotion. Captains were encouraged to take on as many “servants” as possible by dint of the fact that they received the pay, eighteen shillings per lunar month,³⁰ of each boy under their care. Muster rolls for three of the largest ships present at the Battle of Quiberon Bay on November 20, 1759 show high

²⁹ Clark, *Society*, pp. 25, 41.

³⁰ Rodger, *Command*, p. 624.

ratios of captain’s servants to the total complement of Royal Navy men. (Excludes Royal Marines).

Table 1: Ratios of Quarterdeck Boys to Total Complements, 1759.

<u>Ship</u>	<u>Captain/Admiral</u>	<u>Complement (R.N. only)</u>	<u>Captain’s Servants</u>	<u>Ratio Capt’s Servants to Crew</u>
<i>Namur</i>	Buckle	651	32	1:20
<i>Royal George</i>	Campbell/Hawke	780	18	1:43
<i>Union</i>	Hardy/Evans	659	30	1:22

Sources: TNA: PRO ADM36/6255, 5747, 6948, Muster Books for Nov/Dec 1759, HMS *Namur*, HMS *Royal George*, and HMS *Union* respectively.

In 1794 an Order in Council introduced the new rating of “Boy First Class” or “First Class Volunteer,” theoretically abolishing all other entry-level ratings in an effort to limit the number of boys bound for the quarterdeck to the regulation four-per-hundred of the total crew.³¹ As compensation, captain’s wages increased, although it was likely that the disparity saw many captains suffer financially. A comparative table showing the number of first class volunteers and boys as a function of ships’ complements from three of the largest ships at the Battle of Trafalgar, October 21, 1805 demonstrates a significant change. (See Table 2)

It should be noted, however, that ways around the system were available and popular. One method of circumventing regulations involved rating quarterdeck boys as able seamen, thereby disguising their presence as far as the ship’s official muster was concerned.

³¹ Lewis, *Social*, p. 156.

Table 2: Ratios of Quarterdeck Boys to Total Complements, 1805.

<u>Ship</u>	<u>Captain/Admiral</u>	<u>Complement (R.N. only)</u>	<u>1st Class Boys & Volunteers</u>	<u>Ratio 1st Class Boys to Crew</u>
<i>Victory</i>	Hardy/Nelson	663	9	1:73
<i>Royal Sovereign</i>	Rotherham/Collingwood	850*	7	1:121
<i>Temeraire</i>	Harvey	718	8	1:89

Sources: Robert Holden Mackenzie, *The Trafalgar Roll, The Ships and the Officers*, intro. by Colin White (London: Chatham Publishing, 2004), pp. 2, 25, 47; and Dudley Pope, *Decision at Trafalgar* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999), pp. 189, 205.

(*) Note: This figure reflected *Royal Sovereign's* intended complement, although it is known that she went into battle at Trafalgar undermanned and unable to fight her guns on both sides at once.

Lieutenants' passing certificates from 1805 show that 20 percent of those young gentlemen who passed that year entered the service rated "able".³² By this time the practice of raising midshipmen and potential officers from the lower deck had faded. "[T]he forty-year-old midshipman was becoming a rarity," as potential officers were increasingly singled out in childhood.³³ Although no direct financial gains came from rating additional young gentlemen as able seamen, it provided captains with a means of granting politically advantageous favors (and thus boosting their own careers) at a time when appointments for quarterdeck boys were at a premium.

Rodger suggests that the new volunteer ratings were tools of gentrification, arguing that the difference between the three classes of boy – first, second, and third – were based not on professional knowledge but on birth. According to the Order in

³² TNA: PRO ADM107/32&33, "Lieutenant's Passing Certificates," 1805.

³³ Lewis, *Social*, p. 267.

Council of 1794, Boys of the First Class were “to consist of Young Gentlemen intended for the Sea Service . . . : to be styled Volunteers and allowed wages at the rate of £6 per annum.” The Second Class was “to consist of Boys between 15 and 17 years of age to be divided into watches with the seamen in order to make them such – at £5 per annum.” The Third Class consisted of “Boys between 13 and 15 years of age of whom Lieutenants and other officers who are now allowed servants might be permitted to recommend to the Captains, each of them one, to be the attendants upon such officers – at £4 per annum.”³⁴ As Rodger notes, “since no attempt was made to test whatever qualities [a boy] might possess, the only basis for the distinction . . . was that implied by the wording of the Order in Council; that is between gentlemen and the rest.”³⁵ The Order in Council of 1794 was therefore a major indicator in the official trend towards sanctifying the quarterdeck as the exclusive realm of the gentleman. Controlling the number of official positions for officers-in-training and limiting the social groups capable of filling those positions, demonstrated the expanding influence of the Admiralty as a political body in matters traditionally held as a captain’s prerogative.

For much of the eighteenth century, the selection of boys for sea service depended on a combination of influence with and connections to individual captains, enthusiasm, and luck. A relatively democratic process of selection made opportunities available to the sons of sea officers, professional men, and the middling sort as much as to the sons of peers. During the Great Wars, however, opportunities narrowed significantly. Political and social pressure demanded that noble and notable boys receive priority placement. The prevalence of “book entry,” the practice of entering a boy’s name in the muster years

³⁴ Order in Council, July 9, 1794, quoted in Lewis, *Social*, p. 89.

³⁵ Rodger, *Command*, p. 508.

in advance of his actual appearance on board, spoke to the weight of outside influence on a captain. “False muster” constituted a criminal offence, yet captains were very often willing to risk their careers and their reputations for the opportunity to wield patronage or advantage the son of a friend or relative. The five year-old Lord Thomas Cochrane, who would later become the 10th Earl of Dundonald, found his way onto the books of successive ships captained by his uncle Sir Alexander Cochrane. Lord Cochrane did not take up his first appointment as midshipman until the age of seventeen,³⁶ by which time his seniority in the service was well established and most of his sea time required for the examination for lieutenant completed. As long a captain did not attempt to draw pay for the absentee “able seaman” or “master’s mate” the Admiralty tended to turn a blind eye.

Book entry, among other abuses, was not merely the province of gentleman captains serving their own family interests. For captains of more humble origin it represented an opportunity to exercise patronage – a decision that could benefit the son of a fellow mariner as readily as the son of a parliamentarian. Yet, as the Great Wars progressed, the political, social, and financial stakes associated with accepting the sons of the elite as quarterdeck volunteers soared. The prospect of personal and professional gain combined with Admiralty pressure to select boys backed by powerful interest narrowed the field of candidates. All captains, genteel and otherwise, felt a mounting pressure from above to accommodate the sons of notables, a factor that ensured the continuation of book entry well into the first decade of the nineteenth century.³⁷

³⁶ Admiral Lord Cochrane, *The Autobiography of A Seaman*, intro. by Richard Woodman (New York: Lyons Press, 2000), p. 8.

³⁷ Lewis, *Social*, p. 170.

The Midshipman's Lot

The life of a midshipman or quarterdeck boy aboard a Georgian man-of-war varied from ship to ship and captain to captain. Disparities in the age and competency of individual boys produced a wide range of experiences. On the one hand, there was Midshipman Hamilton Davies, who found himself in command of a fire-brig at age ten.³⁸ On the other hand, ten year-old William Henry Dillon was overwhelmed by the noise and activity aboard his first ship, HMS *Saturn*. His fears resulted in a surly and “pensive mood” that required the cheerful efforts and “soothing expressions” of his father.³⁹ Most cases, however, fell somewhere between these extremes. Midshipmen and quarterdeck boys of all ages generally came under the immediate supervision of a ship's lieutenants who served as both professional and personal mentors. Lieutenants regulated the separation of their own divisions into sub-divisions, placing a young gentleman in charge of each as a means of acquainting him with the duties of command. Standard responsibilities included such tasks as running aloft to supervise seamen in setting, reefing, or furling sail; supervising sub-divisions at small arms training; attending to the swift transition of the watch; maintaining the ship's safety by constantly checking for naked lights and lanterns below decks; witnessing visits to the purser's, steward's or boatswain's store rooms; and casting the log line in order to determine the speed and, when in soundings, the position of the ship. Beyond these basics, practical duties varied greatly, often depending on the type of ship in which a young gentleman served. Rodger notes the disparities from ship to ship:

³⁸ Ibid., p. 173.

³⁹ Sir William Henry Dillon, *A Narrative of my Professional Adventures, 1790-1839*, Vol. I, ed. Michael Lewis, Navy Records Society, Vol. XCIII (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne and Co., 1953), p. 12.

It was commonly remarked that there were different types of midshipmen in different ships: sophisticated and hard-swearing in ships of the line, slovenly and ill-bred in little sloops and brigs, but an elite in the frigates, smart and proud of facing early danger and responsibility.⁴⁰

Much of this stereotyping stemmed from the nature of the commissions awarded the various ships. As reconnaissance vessels, frigates generally received independent cruises, detached from a fleet and were usually exempt from banal convoy duties. Intelligent, highly-motivated captains received these “plum” commands and typically wasted no time in seeking out engagement and potential prizes. Boys of similar mettle aspired to frigate service. By seventeen John Harvey Boteler, who later became a distinguished captain, expressed such a desire: “. . . my brother Thomas and I, having served so far in ships of the line, both wished for a more active time in frigates. . . .”⁴¹ A boy’s participation in boarding actions, cutting-out expeditions, and shore raids, all of which required hand-to-hand combat with pistols and dirks, were virtually assured in frigate service.⁴² The popularity and prestige of serving aboard a “crack” frigate meant that the sons of noblemen and prominent gentlemen often found their way into these scarce and coveted positions. The four frigates present during the Trafalgar action shipped one quarter of the aristocratic young gentlemen out of a fleet of thirty-three vessels.⁴³ Yet for all the opportunities frigates presented for distinguished service and prize money, their quarterdeck boys sacrificed on comfort. Peter Cullen, a gentleman who served as surgeon’s mate aboard the frigate *Squirrel*, described the berth for himself, eight midshipmen, and two master’s mates which consisted of two small spaces forward

⁴⁰ Rodger, *Command*, p. 508.

⁴¹ Captain John Harvey Boteler, *Recollections of My Life at Sea from 1808 to 1803*, ed. David Bonner-Smith, Navy Records Society, Vol. LXXXII (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne and Co., 1942), pp. 42.

⁴² Robert Wilson, “Robert Wilson’s Journal,” in *Five Naval Journals, 1789-1817*, ed. H. G. Thursfield, Navy Records Society, Vol. XCI (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne and Co., 1951), pp. 154-158.

⁴³ See Appendix B.

of the officers' quarters on the lower deck, where they slung their hammocks and ate their meals adjacent the bulk of the ship's company.⁴⁴ Genteel boys from comfortable middle and upper-class environments often expressed horror at the conditions aboard a man-of-war. Young Frederick Chamier wrote of his coming aboard the frigate *Salsette* in 1809:

I had anticipated a kind of elegant house with guns in the windows . . . [but found] the tars of England rolling about casks, without jackets, shoes or stockings . . . the deck was dirty, slippery, and wet; the smells abominable; the whole sight disgusting . . . I remarked the slovenly attire of the midshipmen, dressed in shabby round jackets, glazed hats, no gloves, and some without shoes. . . .⁴⁵

Conditions were hardly better in larger ships. First through third rates (vessels of over one hundred guns down to vessels of sixty-four guns) allowed young gentlemen separate quarters. Midshipmen and quarterdeck boys aged fourteen and older berthed on the orlop, the lowest deck above the hold in a dank space forward of the mizzen mast dubbed the "cockpit". At approximately five hundred to eleven hundred square feet, a ship of the line's cockpit accommodated anywhere from twenty to thirty-plus midshipmen, master's mates, surgeon's mates and other petty officers,⁴⁶ providing a place for them to eat, sleep, and pass their free time. Situated well below the water line, the cockpit's only light came from tallow dips, whose stench mingled with the miasma of putrid bilge water, rotting timber, and the ooze from casks of rancid food. One midshipman, remarking on the dearth of air in the cockpit, noted that it was impossible to keep a flame alight. Proximity to the hold did not help matters. Long cruises often saw the build up of toxic gases in the hold which, despite their ability to asphyxiate human beings, failed to eradicate the vermin that infested the lower reaches of a ship. Robert

⁴⁴ Peter Cullen, "The Memoirs of Peter Cullen Esq.," in Thursfield, *Naval Journals*, p. 53.

⁴⁵ Frederick Chamier, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 509.

⁴⁶ Peter Goodwin, *The Ships of Trafalgar: The British, French and Spanish Fleets, 21 October, 1805* (London: Conway Maritime, 2005), p. 26, and Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy: the Ships, Men and Organization, 1793-1815* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000), p. 93.

Mercer Wilson, a young captain's clerk described the results of cleaning and "smoking" the hold of the frigate *Unite* in 1808: "Opened the hatches, found about one thousand mice dead."⁴⁷

Edward Thompson Esq., a civilian commentator, lamented the conditions faced by young gentlemen who were "bedded worse than hogs, and eat less delicacies. . . ."⁴⁸ Midshipmen and boys, regardless of social rank, generally ate the same fare as seamen and warrant officers. Salt beef and pork, ships' biscuit, cheese, pease porridge, portable soup, and the occasional fresh vegetable, all washed down with a gallon of small beer or a pint of grog each day made it a harsh transition for the palates of well-bred boys accustomed to fine food and wine. Invitations to dine at the captain's table or in the ward room with the senior officers often brought the only respite from a menu that was at best tasteless and at worst putrid.

"Youngsters," or boys under thirteen, berthed with the gunner in the Gun Room. Not quite as "stygian" and a somewhat healthier place for an "officers' nursery," the Gun Room also provided adult supervision under a "steady sort of man" like the master gunner.⁴⁹ Warrant officers were also known to bring their wives to sea despite Admiralty regulations, yet their function as surrogate mothers to the youngest quarterdeck recruits often contributed to the toleration these particular women aboard ship. Even boys lucky enough to find maternal care aboard a man-of-war endured a life of shocking rawness. Working uniforms consisted of coarse wool or kersey round-jackets and duck or canvas trousers. The "short clothes" of the navy offered little distinction between quarterdeck

⁴⁷ Wilson, "Journal," p. 214.

⁴⁸ Mr. Thompson to J. T. Esq, November, 1755, in Edward Thompson, *Sailor's Letters, Written to His Select Friends in England During his Voyages and Travels in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas From the Year 1754 to 1759*, Second Edition, Vol. I (London: Becket & de Hondt, 1767), p. 141.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *Social*, p. 262.

boys and their inferiors. Dress uniforms introduced prior to the Seven Years' War allowed young gentlemen some outward signs of rank. Brass buttons and white collar patches on the same short wool jackets, breeches, and stockings lent some elegance to an otherwise undistinguished appearance. There were, of course, exceptions. Boteler aboard the frigate *Orontes* remarked, "We were considered a crack ship, and the midshipmen dressed in cocked hats, tight white pantaloons and Hessian boots, with gilt twist edging and a bullion tassel."⁵⁰ Such sartorial splendor suggested a predominance of well-heeled boys, a far cry from Boteler's shipmate aboard *Dictator* who had to make the best of his limited resources. John Jones "a young Welsh lad, very good-humoured . . . had nothing but his pay, and yet he was the neatest dressed midshipman in the ship, his 'weekly account' kept so white with pipe-clay."⁵¹ For some quarterdeck boys, affectations of elegance drew the wrath of senior officers who equated genteel standards of costume with signs of effeminacy and weakness. James Anthony Gardner, a midshipman aboard the *Edgar* in 1789, recalled an incident that brought the wrath his Admiral, the Honorable John Leveson Gower, down upon a fellow petty officer. "He [Gower] was a mortal foe to puppyism, and one of our midshipmen going aloft with gloves on, attracted his eye; for which he got a rub down that I am certain he remembers to the present day. . . ."⁵²

Such instances provided brutal reminders of the distance, both physical and symbolic, separating naval and civilian life. Aboard His Majesty's ships young

⁵⁰ Boteler, *Recollections*, p. 43.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵² James Anthony Gardner, *Recollections of James Anthony Gardner, Commander R.N., 1775-1814*, ed. R. Vesey Hamilton and John Knox Laughton, Navy Records Society, Vol. XXXI (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne and Co., 1906), p. 67.

gentlemen, regardless of their background or social hauteur, worked, slept, ate, and dressed in ways that offered little of the comfort or distinction afforded by life ashore.

PART I – SELECTING YOUNG GENTLEMEN FOR SEA SERVICE

Noble Rot

The Earl St. Vincent's audience with King George III, 1807:

[A]nd the King asked him: "Well Lord St. Vincent you have now quitted active service, as you say forever, - tell me do you think the Naval service is better off or worse than when you first entered it?"

Lord St. Vincent: "Very much worse may it please Your Majesty."

The King very quickly: "How so? How so?"

Lord St. Vincent: "Sire, I have always thought that a sprinkling of nobility was very desirable in the Navy, as it gives some sort of consequence to the service; but at present the Navy is so overrun by the younger branches of nobility, and the sons of Members of Parliament, and they swallow up all the patronage, and so choke the channel to promotion, that the son of an old Officer, however meritorious *both* their services may have been, has little or no chance of getting on."

The King: "Pray who was serving Captain of the Fleet under your Lordship?"

Lord St. Vincent: "Rear Admiral Osborne, Sire, the son of an old Officer."

The King: "Osborne! Osborne! I think there are many more than one of that name Admirals."

Lord St Vincent: "Yes Sire, there are three brothers, all Admirals."

The King: "That's pretty well for democracy, I think."

Lord St. Vincent: "Sire, - the father of these officers served twenty years as First Lieutenant, with my dear friend Admiral Barrington, who had never sufficient interest to get him beyond the rank of Commander. He was of necessity obliged to send all his sons to sea, and to my knowledge, they never had anything more to live on than their pay . . . they got on in the service upon the strength of their own merits alone; and Sire, I hope Your Majesty will pardon me for saying, I would rather promote the son of an old deserving Officer than any Noble in the land."

The King mused for a minute or two, and then said, "I think you're right Lord St. Vincent, quite right."¹

As apocryphal as this account appears, it nonetheless reflects opinions representative of the feelings of both the former First Lord and his sovereign about the excess of aristocratic young men in the service and its adverse effect on an institution that traditionally represented a meritocracy. St. Vincent, however, took the point a step

¹ Tucker, *St. Vincent*, pp. 266-67. Tucker's italics.

beyond the issue of individual merit, suggesting that a naval pedigree ought take precedence over that of peerage.

Lewis' data on the social status of Royal Navy officers' parents relative to promotion to flag rank testifies to St. Vincent's concern. Between 1793 and 1815, sons of baronets and peers accounted for 12 percent of the total sample of 1800 officers while sons of "professional men," those with naval, clerical, military, legal, civil, or medical connections, accounted for 50 percent. In the arena of promotion, however, nearly 41 percent of baronets and peers advanced to Rear-Admiral's rank or higher, while only 22 percent of professional sons managed to achieve the same success.² The desirability and prestige of a naval career, boosted by Prince William Henry's appearance as a quarterdeck boy, effectively began a constriction of opportunities for entry-level officers based on social rank, despite George III's ostensibly "democratic" ideals and nominal sympathies.

Changing Selection

Rodger's survey of the Royal Navy during the Seven Years' War explores several avenues open to boys with ambitions to officer rank. Captains' servants represented those boys of "respectable families" who entered not before the age of thirteen, or if a naval officer's son, not before the age of eleven.³ This theoretically allowed a certain amount of general schooling and preparation in the navigational sciences before a young gentleman went to sea. In practice, boys joined the service years earlier, taking advantage of the fact that "the Navy [of the 1760s] was the only profession for a gentleman that did not require

² Lewis, *Social*, p. 31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

– indeed, did not admit – the application of money or influence.”⁴ For aristocratic younger sons and the sons of impoverished nobility, as much as for sons of genteel, professional, and merchant families, adventure afloat presented an attractive option to the struggles of civilian life. For a small allowance, or in some cases no money at all, boys could embark on a respectable, if socially unglamorous profession. Over the next six years a boy might move between the ratings of able seaman, ordinary seaman, midshipman, and back to captain’s servant on the ship’s muster. Such ratings were meaningless in terms of shipboard duties, although they allowed a boy to gather the six years sea-experience required for eligibility to the lieutenant’s examination.

The second method of rising to commissioned rank during the 1750s and 1760s began on the lower deck, with those boys whose ability allowed them to vault the ranks of warrant officers and land on the quarterdeck. This method harkened back to the Cromwellian practice of elevating competent seamen to the quarterdeck via the midshipman’s berth. Throughout the Seven Years’ War lower-deck promotion remained a common practice.

The final method of entry came via the merchant service. Experience gained in the East Indies, West Indies, or Baltic trades often presented young men with a chance to impress naval captains with their skill and seamanship and secure a place as a potential officer. In both the second and third instances, midshipmen and quarterdeck “boys” tended to be older and more practically experienced. Lieutenant’s passing certificates from 1759 reveal that 52 percent of young gentlemen passed their examination after six years of service; however, only 16 percent of the 192 men and boys passed that year entered the service at age fourteen. Twelve percent of applicants, the second largest

⁴ Rodger, *Wooden*, pp. 253-54.

group, were twenty-five years old at the time of passing.⁵ This represents a significant number of older quarterdeck “boys” and suggests that a good proportion of would-be officers came from ratings other than that of captain’s servant. With so diverse a pool of hopefuls, the determining factor for success in each of these officer-entry cases was ability. In the era of Anson and Hawke the maxim of merit remained firm: “without a good reputation for professional ability, even the well connected [boy] fared badly.”⁶

By the start of the French Revolutionary Wars, the field of officer entry had narrowed. The most popular age of entry remained fourteen, as six years’ experience with two of those years rated midshipmen or master’s mate were still required in order to sit the lieutenant’s examination at the minimum age of twenty.⁷ A shift, however, towards a younger and more socially-elevated junior officer corps became apparent with the 1794 Order in Council and with the relatively lower incidence of “tarpaulin” midshipmen. Lewis’ survey of officer entry shows that barely 3 percent of the total 3751 officers created between 1793 and 1815 came from the lower deck while 86 percent entered as quarterdeck boys in one form or another.⁸ In terms of age, 72 percent of the 285 lieutenants passed in 1805 entered at or before age sixteen, with 86 percent spending between six and seven years at sea before sitting their examination.⁹ These figures reflect a younger group of candidates and a more concentrated selection and grooming process for young gentlemen. As Thomas Trotter, surgeon aboard HMS *Terpsichore* in 1802 noted in his *A Practical Plan for Manning the Navy*:

⁵ TNA: PRO ADM107/5, “Lieutenant’s Passing Certificates,” 1759. See Appendix D.

⁶ Rodger, *Wooden*, pp. 263-64, 278.

⁷ Lewis, *Social*, p. 160. Note: Lewis also acknowledged that “no rule was more universally dodged than this one of a Lieutenant’s minimum age.” Examining captains absolved themselves of complicity in this type of fraud by writing up passing certificates as “the candidate appears to be” rather than “the candidate is” twenty years old. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 146-47.

⁹ TNA: PRO ADM107/32-33, “Lieutenant’s Passing Certificates,” 1805. See Appendix D.

No person will have the hardihood to contend that a seaman's duty can be learned in less than seven years or after 21 years of age. He must be accustomed to it from boyhood, for no adult can ever be brought to endure the privation, dangers and hardships which are inseparable from a sea life.¹⁰

In January 1806 the Admiralty under Charles Middleton, then Lord Barham, issued its new *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea*, a series of orders that allowed greater Admiralty intervention in day to day shipboard activities including the management, if not the selection, of entry-level officers. The regulations initiated a move towards more centralized forms of naval governance and laid the foundations for future reforms which would, by 1815, eliminate the captain's monopoly on the selection of potential officers. The direction of 1815 which stated that "no Midshipman should be received on board and entered in the Ship's Books unless or until he had received Admiralty Sanction,"¹¹ instituted centralized approval of all young gentlemen. This allowed the Lords Commissioners greater say in who came aboard His Majesty's ships and provided a means of controlling both the quantity and quality of new recruits entering an already swollen officer corps.

Of the 291 passed lieutenants in 1814, a year that saw a substantial number of ships paid off in anticipation of the peace, only 33 percent of midshipmen passed their six to seven years at sea before seeking commissioned status. The largest group by far, 47 percent, spent only three and a half to five and a half years at sea before being allowed to sit the examination for lieutenant. Of these, more than 50 percent were fourteen years old or younger at their time of entry into the service.¹² Despite the fact that the 1808 *Regulations and Instructions* lowered the minimum age for the lieutenant's examination

¹⁰ Thomas Trotter, quoted in Brian Lavery, ed., *Shipboard Life and Organization, 1731-1815*, Navy Records Society, Vol. 138 (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1998), p. xii.

¹¹ Lewis, *Social*, p. 159.

¹² TNA: PRO ADM107/46-47, "Lieutenant's Passing Certificates," 1814. See Appendix D.

to nineteen,¹³ the most likely explanation for this mass of rapid and youthful promotions during years of declining naval activity was the opportunity it afforded to “retire” young gentlemen with the consolations of commissioned rank and half-pay, a benefit to which midshipmen and volunteers were not entitled. This enabled the discreet removal of well-connected but unpromising young gentlemen and provided an incentive for boys who lacked real commitment to a naval career to “jump ship.” Despite its costs to the government, promotion “out” relieved pressure on the narrow channel of promotion and ensured a moderate level of professionalism within the ranks of midshipmen and petty officers.

The trend that favored the sons of the patrician classes for volunteer appointments gained momentum in the peace-time navy after 1815. Lewis notes that of the 834 post-war volunteers, 149, or nearly 18 percent, came from the ranks of peers and baronets.¹⁴ This represented an increase of 6 percent from those who entered during the war years. When seen in relation to the size of the Royal Navy fleet, which shrank dramatically over the twenty years from 1810 to 1830, the proportion of volunteer positions being awarded to young Honorables increased significantly.

¹³ TNA: PRO ADM7/971 “Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty’s Service at Sea,” 1808, Sect. VI, Ch. II, Art. IX. The age change was initiated by an Order in Council, 4 July, 1805. See PRO ADM1/5215, Ch. II, Article IX.

¹⁴ Michael Lewis, *The Navy in Transition: A Social History, 1814-1864* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), p. 22.

Table 3. Royal Navy Fleets by Year

	<u>1760</u>	<u>1790</u>	<u>1795</u>	<u>1800</u>	<u>1804*</u>	<u>1805</u>	<u>1810</u>	<u>1815</u>	<u>1820</u>	<u>1830</u>
SOTL	135	130	123	127	88	136	152	126	112	82
Cruisers	115	130	160	158	138	160	183	151	101	100
Small ships	51	16	28	43	-	33	63	73	35	35
Total	301	276	311	328	226*	329	398	350	248	217

Sources: Jan Glete, *Navies and Nations: Warships, Navies, and State Building in Europe and America, 1500-1860*, Vol. II (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1993), pp. 552-55. 1804 figures (*) are drawn from Rodger, *Command*, pp. 615-17, and reflect St. Vincent's decommissioning efforts during the Peace of Amiens.

Notes: SOTL= ships of the line and 50s up until 1790, Cruisers= frigates and 50s after 1790, Small ships=vessels 300-500 tons until 1790, 500-1000 tons after 1790. This category does not include sloops, brigs, bomb vessels, schooners or cutters. Glete's figures do not distinguish between ships on active service and those "in ordinary" preparing for sea.

As the number of positions for officer candidates dwindled in the years after Waterloo, competition for a place in the midshipman's berth mounted. The political and social elites added their weight to the pressure bearing down on both individual captains and the Board of Admiralty. The result was a continued "gentrification" of the quarterdeck, a move that testified to the pervasive sense of old-order social values within the naval hierarchy.

In summary, the trend evidenced between the Seven Years' War and the Napoleonic Wars saw a younger, more gentlemanly group of quarterdeck boys eligible for officer status. Although the gentrification of the midshipman's berth began as a result of selections made by individual captains, the outcome represented a gradual process of Admiralty incursion upon the ultimate expression of a captain's power – patronage. It also represented a move towards centralized control of personnel matters.¹⁵ In the social polarization of its officer corps and in the escalation of Admiralty control, which further strengthened the position of the Lords Commissioners as players in wider political

¹⁵ Lewis, *Social*, p. 159.

spheres, the Royal Navy assumed the characteristics of an *ancien régime*. Rodger expresses the change as “a division [that] was slowly opening along a fault-line . . . between those who were gentlemen by birth and those who were not.” The trend reinforced old systems of social precedence and patrician hegemony and cultivated the division of social rank that “was to become the central organizing principle of the ranks and ratings of the Navy after 1815.”¹⁶

Sobriety, Diligence and Qualifications – the Ideal Young Gentleman

In 1787 Captain Cuthbert Collingwood wrote to a hopeful young officer, O. M. Lane, dispensing his advice on a naval career:

you may depend on it, that it is more in your power than in anyone elses [sic] to promote both your comfort and advancement. A strict unwearied attention to your duty, and a complaisant and respectful behaviour, not only to your superiors, but to every body, will ensure you their regard, and the reward will surely come, and I hope soon, in the shape of preferment. . . . Let it be your ambition to be foremost on all duty. Do not be a nice observer of turns, but present yourself ready for everything. . . . Let your companions be such as yourself, or superior; for the worth of a man will always be ruled by that of his company. . . . Read – let me charge you to read. Study books that treat of your profession and of history . . . Remember Lane, before you are five and twenty, you must establish a character that will serve you all your life.¹⁷

Collingwood’s advice touched on the most important factors determining the success of quarterdeck boys in the Royal Navy after the Seven Years’ War including education, temperament, conduct, and perhaps most importantly, connections. In practice, and perhaps contrary to Collingwood’s intentions, the first three of these factors tended to reinforce the importance of the latter and contributed to the advent of a more genteel midshipman’s berth. Gentlemanly conduct became a proxy for merit replacing, or at least

¹⁶ Rodger, *Command*, p. 527.

¹⁷ Cuthbert Collingwood to O. M. Lane, London, November 7, 1787, in Newnham Collingwood, *Correspondence*, Vol. I, pp. 18-20.

standing alongside, the “Sobriety, Diligence, and Qualifications”¹⁸ traditionally demanded of a quarterdeck boy and justifying the rapid pace of promotion for boys of noble or high rank. Such allowances further supported impressions of a Royal Navy devoted to maintaining the bulwarks of a patrician state.

Connections, Interest and Patronage

When it came to appointing young gentlemen and overseeing their advancement, Collingwood’s faith in reward based on merit marked him as a member of the old school. During the American War of Independence, Lord Sandwich famously distributed appointments and promotions with remarkable impartiality to political and even royal interest. In 1760 Sandwich responded to Lord Berkley’s protests over the denial of his brother’s claims to promotion: “. . . there are many young men of fashion in the Navy who are equally solicitous of preferment and their friends are equally pressing; your Lordship will find on enquiry that my answer to all of them is the same, whatever their connections may be.” In a final dig, Sandwich raised the issue of performance: “. . . if Captain Berkley wishes to get out of his Fireship into an active Sloop in order to have a greater probability of distinguishing himself, I shall very readily accommodate him when a proper opening happens. . . .”¹⁹ As First Lord, Sandwich exhibited considerable loyalty to naval tradition, placing seniority and the merits of distinguished service ahead of aristocratic and political influence.

By the next round of conflict, however, few of Sandwich’s like-minded followers remained. In 1809 Collingwood stood virtually alone in his advocacy of merit over interest and was well aware of the oddity of his convictions: “You may have heard that I

¹⁸ TNA: PRO ADM 107/32, extract from a certificate issued by the Navy Board in 1805, confirming a young gentleman’s credentials and his eligibility to sit the Examination for Lieutenant.

¹⁹ NMM SAN/V/13, Lord Sandwich to Lord Berkley, written between February 16 and April 13, 1760.

am reckoned rather queer in the promotion of young men. I advance a great many who have not a friend to speak for them, while those I respect most in the world sometimes plead in vain.”²⁰ This statement, penned just a year before Collingwood’s death, perhaps reflected not a little contempt for the omnipotence of the Admiralty board, which denied his repeated requests to be retired from command of the Mediterranean Fleet. Rebellious attitudes amongst captains towards the prevailing political winds were, however, far from the norm. By the start of the French Revolutionary Wars the lure of political, financial, and/or social gain to be had from the acceptance of well-connected boys, turned the heads of most naval commanders capable of wielding patronage. This, combined with increasing Admiralty interference in the appointment process, limited the field of eligible boys considerably. Even Nelson, for all his celebrated flouting of regulations, was not immune to pressure from above. To the Right Honorable William Windham who solicited favor on behalf of a friend’s son, Nelson wrote, “. . . it is a fact although I can hardly believe it that I am unable to send a Lad to Sea, the refusals I receive from the Admiralty filling up every vacancy astonish me. . . .”²¹ To a fellow admiral Nelson expressed similar anxieties in the wake of moves to centralize Admiralty control over appointments and promotions:

I will explain to you exactly my power of promotion and you will then see the very distant prospect I can have of obliging my friends. All Admiralty vacancies are filled up by the First Lord of the Admiralty as by List given me. Nothing is left to a Commander In Chief of the Present day but Deaths & dismissals by Court Martials [sic]. . . .²²

²⁰ Max Adams, *Trafalgar’s Lost Hero: Admiral Lord Collingwood and the Defeat of Napoleon* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), pp. 21-22.

²¹ Lord Nelson to The Rt. Hon. William Windham, November 20, 1802, in Colin White, ed., *Nelson: The New Letters* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2005), p. 83.

²² Lord Nelson to Admiral Roddam, November 5, 1804, in White, *New Letters*, p. 84.

Who then, managed a spot on this privileged list? Even prior to the start of the French Revolutionary Wars, the roll sagged with social weight. Admiral Sir William Henry Dillon, a notorious snob, remarked in his memoirs on the number of notables present aboard HMS *Alcide* in 1790, where he entered as a captain's servant at the age of ten: "It was a truly pleasing circumstance to me to find that most of these young gentlemen were highly connected – the names of some of them will satisfy you, such as Byng, Herbert, Digby, Pigot and Ayscough."²³ The aristocratic and naval-political connections of these young men reflected the growing outside influence upon the Admiralty board in the last decades of the century.

St. Vincent, as First Lord of the Admiralty from February 1801 to May 1804, castigated his predecessor, the 2nd Earl Spencer, for his shameless use of patronage and his abuse of the appointment process as a means of satisfying family and friends. Such rectitude, however, did not take precedence over St. Vincent's Whig politics or extend to his own relations. To the commander-in-chief of the North American station he wrote:

This will be delivered to you by Captain Fane of the *Driver*, son of Mr Fane, Member of the County of Oxford, who is sent out to you with a view to his being promoted to the rank of post-captain . . . Captain Fane is a near relation of mine and every way worthy of your good offices and protection.²⁴

When it came to dealing with the budding career of a "listed" candidate such as the son of Lord Radstock, Nelson's tone, too, was much altered:

Relative to your Son . . . you may rely my Dear Lord that I will take the earliest opportunity after he has served his time of promoting him, if we do not take particular care of the children of our Brethren we should assume to be reprobated

²³ Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, p. 21. Note: Lewis concludes that William Henry Dillon was in all likelihood the bastard son of Sir John Talbot Dillon, Baron of the Holy Roman Empire, D.S.P. This hereditary title did not pass to William but to his cousin, John Joseph Dillon. William Henry assumed the title of "Sir" anyway. *Ibid.*, pp. x, xvi.

²⁴ Lord St. Vincent, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 517.

and when those Children come with more merit than others they have a double claim to our notice.²⁵

Nelson redeemed such blatant sycophancy with the justification of merit. Nominally, merit remained the distinguishing feature between the use of patronage in the army and in the Royal Navy. But while proof of one's ability remained an important factor in the promotion of sea officers, it played little or no role in the appointment of young gentlemen whose age and inexperience allowed small opportunity to prove themselves through service. Boys over the age of thirteen were, however, expected to bring with them knowledge of navigation and mathematics, skills that marked them for command. Yet even boys from the pinnacle of educated society often lacked such fundamental training. Admiral Lord Thomas Cochrane lamented the incompetence of elite quarterdeck recruits: ". . . of the many [young] officers furnished to me through parliamentary influence, it can be only said that they were seldom trusted . . . I considered it preferable, on pressing occasions, to do their duty myself. . . ." ²⁶ But for all the social and political pressure exerted on the Admiralty, and consequently forced down the chain of command, the skills of basic seamanship remained crucial to the effectiveness of a budding officer. Without a minimal level of professional ability on the quarterdeck, the Royal Navy might have collapsed under the weight of its own incompetence. Self-preservation forced a certain moderation in the Royal Navy's promotion of young gentlemen who were also backed by powerful interest. As unwieldy as the problem of over-mighty, under-trained young gentlemen might have appeared to traditionalists such as Collingwood, St. Vincent, and Nelson, who generally valued merit above all, the Royal Navy never endured the kind of patronage plague that infected land-based military institutions. As

²⁵ Lord Nelson to the Rt. Hon. Lord Radstock, October 13, 1803, in White, *New Letters*, p. 93.

²⁶ Cochrane, *Autobiography*, p. 22.

Lewis notes of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century navy, “it must be admitted that merit always counted for something, though not for so much as it should.”²⁷

The Three “Rs”

During the course of the Great Wars, opportunities for entry-level officers narrowed to those with more formal academic foundations. The days of young, unschooled officers such as *Ramblin’ Jack’s* Captain John Cremer, who began his sea-career in 1708 and prospered in the service for nearly seventy years thereafter, were over by the start of the French Revolutionary Wars. While Bellamy’s comment in the introduction to Cremer’s journal smacks of anachronistic bias – “A man so astonishing in his orthography would [in 1936] hardly be allowed to become a police constable, let alone a master mariner”²⁸ – it is a judgment that gained currency in the Royal Navy of the late-eighteenth century. As a ten year-old “youngster” in his first appointment, Dillon recalled with pride his introduction to Captain Sir Andrew Douglas of the *Alcide*, who expressed delight “when I told him that I had partly been educated in France,” whereupon Sir Andrew “made a few observations on the necessity of naval officers being familiar with foreign languages.”²⁹ Poor Cremer was only loosely familiar with his native English.

Dillon had been well-schooled at an early age, although his education did not end when he came aboard *Alcide*. The ship’s schoolmaster, Mr. Humphreys, conducted classes in navigation and general studies, “from 9 o’clock in the morning till 12: [and] in the afternoon from 2 till 4.”³⁰ Contrary to the general impression cast by Humphreys’ less

²⁷ Michael Lewis, intro. to *A Narrative of My Professional Adventures*, by Sir William Henry Dillon, Vol. I, p. 5.

²⁸ R. Reynell Bellamy, ed., intro. to, *Ramblin’ Jack, The Journal of Captain John Cremer, 1760-1774* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), p. 6.

²⁹ Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, p. 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

rigorous contemporaries, he performed his pedagogical duties with skill and diligence. The author of the diary from HMS *Gibraltar* in 1811 appeared to be the tutor (and brother) of Frederick Gilly, a fifteen year-old midshipman. The tutor's efforts represented the more haphazard type of education available to young gentlemen aboard ship. His entry of May 20 noted:

Wrote out some mathematics for Frederick and at first endeavoured to instruct him in that branch of knowledge, but as I found he could make little [progress?] without the necessary books, I gave it up and substituted geography in its place . . . and found that he made every improvement I could wish. . . .³¹

Mr. Macbride, the schoolmaster of the seventy-four gun *Edgar* in 1787, was a “drunken and obscene” man who inspired little scholastic progress among the midshipmen in his charge but did provide them with a subject for lampoons and practical jokes.³² Despite the sometimes dubious advantages of a tutor at sea, naval schoolmasters were rare, even by the close of the eighteenth century, appearing primarily in first rates and flag ships.³³ Not until 1806 did the service make warrant-officer status available to schoolmasters, thus encouraging a higher caliber of instructor to enlist and making practicable the instruction of boys at sea. For the most part, however, young gentlemen were better off in shore-based schools which offered skilled instructors and a greater scope of study.

Lord Cochrane entered the service in 1793 as a midshipman at the ripe age of seventeen. While his maturity obviated the need for extensive shipboard schooling, the first chapter of Cochrane's autobiography is a meticulous chronicle of his education relative to the changing fortunes of his family. From private French tutors, to instruction

³¹ National Maritime Museum, UK: JOD/148, “Diary of a Midshipman Pysent.” The title of this manuscript is misleading as the author, though unnamed, reveals himself to be the brother and shipboard tutor of “Frederick.” Lavery concluded the subject of the diary was Midshipman Frederick Gilly, *Shipboard*, p. 459.

³² Gardner, *Recollections*, ed. Hamilton, p. xvi.

³³ Lewis, *Social*, p. 259.

in the military sciences by retired army sergeants, to a spell at Mr. Chauvet's "excellent" school in Kensington, Cochrane made clear the high value ascribed to education among naval officers in the last decade of the eighteenth century.³⁴

The trend towards preparing boys with educations relevant to a career as a naval officer can be traced to Charles II's foundation of Christ's Hospital School for the Navy. Established in 1673 to train "40 poor boys . . . in the art of navigation,"³⁵ such altruism on behalf of the underprivileged, in fact, ran contrary to the new century's attempts to raise the social status of naval officers. The Royal Naval Academy opened to students in Portsmouth in 1733³⁶ with the express purpose of raising crops of aristocratic or gentlemanly young officers. Limited to forty places, the Academy cost between £70 and £80 a year, too rich for the vast majority of the middling sort. Measures were taken in later years, however, to open fifteen of these positions to the sons of naval officers.

Poor administration and an equally poor reputation for turning out ignorant young debauchers meant that the Academy was rarely full and subsequently "had little impact on the Navy as a whole."³⁷ Expansion and reform of school operations in the 1790s saw some improvement in the proficiency of its graduates. Of the 288 passed lieutenants for 1805, 10 entered the service as scholars, receiving between two and four and a half year's sea-time credit while at school.³⁸ These small numbers justified assessments past and present, that the total impact of the Academy on the service was negligible. St. Vincent's

³⁴ Cochrane, *Autobiography*, pp. 6-9.

³⁵ Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, p. 25.

³⁶ Christopher Lloyd, ed. *A Memoir of James Trevenen*, Navy Records Society, Vol. CI (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne and Co., 1959), p. 2. Note: Rodger in *Command*, p. 387, cites the opening year as 1737, although the majority of sources consulted agree on 1733.

³⁷ Rodger, *Command*, p. 387.

³⁸ TNA: PRO ADM107/32-33, "Lieutenant's Passing Certificates," 1805. See Appendix D.

opinion of the school as a “sink of vice and abomination”³⁹ did not improve with time. Re-christened in 1806 as the Royal Naval College, the school’s capacity increased to seventy students.⁴⁰ The effort, however, proved to be too little too late in a navy with less than ten years of the war left to run.

Most quarterdeck boys were expected to come aboard with a suitable general education in reading, writing, mathematics, trigonometry, and the rudiments of navigation as captains recognized the difficulty of perfecting such disciplines amidst the distractions of a ship. Boys were encouraged to take leave of their ship for a year or two between the ages of twelve and fourteen in order to refine their education ashore. James Anthony Gardner left HMS *Conqueror* at the age of seven to go to school ashore, having entered the service at age five.⁴¹ While at school a boy’s sea time continued to accrue such that they returned to their ships with no loss of seniority. Armed with a solid grounding in navigation, perfection of the art continued aboard ship, under the guidance of a captain or first lieutenant. Even as an admiral, Collingwood paid particular attention to the scholastic progress of the boys in his charge. To his friend J. E. Blackett, he wrote:

Young _____ appears to me to be a very good, mild-tempered boy, and I will leave nothing undone which is in my power to promote his knowledge and interests. He is studying geometry with me, and I keep him close to his books. It is a pity, as he was not intended for the sea-service, that he has not been taught navigation; but I will at least prepare him for a better master.⁴²

As the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars progressed, pressure from the twin forces of politics and patronage mounted, resulting in the appearance of aristocratic boys

³⁹ James Anthony Gardner, *Above and Under Hatches, being Naval Recollections in Shreds and Patches with Strange Reflections*, ed. Christopher Lloyd (London: Batchworth Press, 1955), p. xi.

⁴⁰ www.royal-navy.mod.uk/static/pages/4741.html, accessed 1/12/06.

⁴¹ Gardner, *Recollections*, ed. Hamilton, p. 11.

⁴² Cuthbert Collingwood to J. E. Blackett, July 22, 1798, in Newnham Collingwood, *Correspondence*, Vol. I, pp. 92-93.

on quarterdecks throughout the Royal Navy who possessed little or no maritime schooling. In 1801 Collingwood addressed the shortcomings of one young gentleman proffered by his friend Mrs. Moutray:

He is as well-bred, gentlemanly a young man as can be, and I dare say an excellent fox hunter, for he seems skilful in horses, dogs, foxes and such animals. But unluckily . . . these are branches of knowledge not very useful at sea, we do not profit by them off Ushant.⁴³

A year later Collingwood's problems with young gentlemen continued. In another letter to Blakett he complained:

I was surprised to see Mr _____ come out again. They think, when they have served six years at sea, they should be made Lieutenants, and never deem it necessary to qualify themselves. He is a good, quiet young man, and walks about doing no harm; but he has no activity in him. Such people become pensioners upon the Navy, rather than officers in it.⁴⁴

Despite such cases, the increasing emphasis on high educational standards for future officers stemmed from two necessities. The first reflected the need for greater competency not only in seamanship and navigation but in the administrative duties of midshipmen and quarterdeck boys. Since the circulation of Lord Howe's order book for HMS *Magnanime* in 1759,⁴⁵ the responsibilities of midshipmen had expanded to include management of watch, station, and quarter bills for a sub-division and accountability for the slops (clothing), personal property, and the cleanliness of the men, the details of which were to be recorded in accurate and legible reports. By the later years of the Napoleonic Wars the educational demands were even greater. Between 1811 and 1815,

⁴³ Oliver Warner, *The Life and Letters of Vice-Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 236-37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁴⁵ Lord Howe, "Naval Instructions on Board His Majesty's Ship *Magnanime*, 1759," in Lavery, *Shipboard*, pp. 85-85.

Captain Cumby of the *Hyperion* required that midshipmen

send in to the Captain each day, at sea, as soon as may be after noon, their own account, of the ship's way and position as ascertained by log, chronometer and lunar observation. The latter methods of measuring longitude are most earnestly recommended to the constant practice and attention of all the Mates and Midshipmen, as a branch of professional knowledge not only highly creditable, but absolutely and indispensably necessary to the character of a British Naval Officer.⁴⁶

The second need fulfilled by a corps of educated junior officers was the preservation of the quarterdeck as the realm of the gentleman. Education generally provided the dividing line between gentility and the rest. As a function of wider social issues, education merged with perceptions of genteel behaviour equating the two, often wrongly, with a temperament suitable for a sea officer.

Temperament, Conduct, and the Appearance of a Gentleman

One of the consequences of heading to sea at a very young age was that boys, even aristocratic ones, seldom received the kind of polish that could be acquired ashore, such that "polite society was apt to view the sea-officers with some disdain."⁴⁷ Nelson's advice to Emma Hamilton's cousin Charles Conner upon his being rated midshipman in the *Niger*, reiterated the need to uphold a code of conduct indicative of the naval officer's desired image: "I trust that your future conduct in life will prove you both an officer and a gentleman. Recollect that you must be a seaman to be an officer, and also, you cannot be a good officer without being a gentleman."⁴⁸

Wise words, though what lasting impact they effected on a scrum of prematurely-empowered teenage boys is doubtful. John Harvey Boteler, a gentleman's son who went

⁴⁶ Captain William Pryce Cumby, "Orders and Regulations for the Government and Discipline of His Majesty's Ship *Hyperion*, 1811-1815," in Thursfield, *Naval Journals*, p. 342.

⁴⁷ Rodger, *Command*, p. 387.

⁴⁸ Edgar Vincent, *Nelson: Love and Fame* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 5.

to sea in 1808 at the age of twelve, recounted a series of scrapes involving the thrashing of bullying fellow midshipmen, the theft of his captain's fresh-boiled plum pudding, and the smashing of the purser's store of lanterns as retribution for the "miserable dips we were allowed for lighting the berth."⁴⁹ Dillon, too, recounted scenes of Gun Room cutlass duels and quarterdeck fisticuffs with bullying midshipmen, although his more genteel sensibilities were thoroughly offended by "the scenes of licentiousness, drunkenness, swearing and immorality to which I could not help being a witness."⁵⁰

Drunkenness presented a paradox in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century society and within the Royal Navy itself. Cochrane boasted "never in my life to have been inebriated," while simultaneously remarking that "those were days [1797-98] when even gentlemen did not consider it a demerit to drink hard."⁵¹ Nor, at least in naval terms, was it inappropriate to start young. Lord Bernard Coleridge writing to his father at age eleven remarked that "wine is no luxury to me, for I have two glasses at dinner every day and two at supper, which is my half allowance, I not liking grog."⁵² Coleridge was fortunate to have had an option in his choice of beverage. Even Captain James Gambier, or "Preaching Jemmy" as he came to be styled by seamen resentful of his dogmatic Methodism, allowed a most uncharacteristic "splicing of the main-brace" at Christmas 1793, whereby virtually every man and boy aboard the seventy-four gun *Defence* became blind drunk.⁵³ A mariner's access to beer, wine, and spirits, guaranteed by ancient naval

⁴⁹ Boteler, *Recollections*, pp. 32-34.

⁵⁰ Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, p. 14.

⁵¹ Cochrane, *Autobiography*, p. 25.

⁵² Lord Coleridge to his Father, 1804(?), quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 394.

⁵³ Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, p. 102.

traditions,⁵⁴ sadly outlasted the general middle-class tolerance for drunkenness. Increasingly popular evangelical religious movements also lauded the merits of temperance, equating sobriety with superior moral standards and thereby appealing to all those with at least pretensions to gentility.

The Royal Navy of the Napoleonic Wars, still smarting from the mutinies of 1797, adopted harder lines on excessive drinking as a means of effecting greater control over a ship's company. Captain Edward Codrington's "Black List" from HMS *Blake* in 1812-13 recorded 122 crimes of drunkenness and repeated drunkenness out of a total of 174. The most popular punishment meted out for these defaulters was twelve to twenty-four lashes.⁵⁵ Young gentlemen who overindulged, even wealthy, well-connected ones, were seldom tolerated. Boys deemed incurable gin-soaks often found themselves turned out of their ship or quietly dismissed from the service. Robert Wilson recorded in his journal on New Years' Eve, 1806, the case of a fellow midshipman, Mr. Litchfield, whose over-imbibing earned him a ticket home from the American station:

He [Litchfield] had been but a little time back, severely punished for intoxication and behaving himself in an ungentleman-like manner, repeatedly; he was but a youth, and Captain Campbell wished to get him home, for he found remonstrating with him was in vain.⁵⁶

Summaries of courts martial for quarterdeck boys, midshipmen, and acting-lieutenants from 1794 to 1815,⁵⁷ however, reveal a relatively low incidence of charges for drunkenness testifying, perhaps in part, to a growing perception that temperance marked the gentleman, at least on the quarterdeck.

⁵⁴ M. Oppenheim, *A History of the Administration of the Royal Navy and Merchant Shipping in Relation to the Navy: From 1509 to 1660, with an Introduction Treating of the Preceding Period* (Hamburg, NJ: The Shoe String Press, 1961), p. 83.

⁵⁵ NMM COD/3/8, "HMS *Blake* Black List and Punishment Book."

⁵⁶ Robert Wilson "Journal," p. 157. For the cases of Midshipmen, Mssrs. Kelly and Middleton see Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, pp. 70, 103.

⁵⁷ TNA: PRO AMD12/27C-D, "Black Books," Vols. II and III.

In the opinions of some senior commanders, there were far worse shortcomings than drunkenness and youthful mischief. Collingwood valued qualities of temperament and self-motivation that predisposed a boy to life as a sea officer. To his sister Mrs. Stead he complained:

Mrs Currel's son never can be a sailor: he has something very odd in his manner, or rather he has no manner at all, but saunters a melancholic for a week together, unnoticing and unnoticed, except when I give him a little rally to make his blood circulate . . . It is a pity [his mother] had not put him apprentice to Jno. Wilson, the apothecary . . . His gravity would have established his reputation as a learned doctor, and if he did poison an old woman now and then, better to do that than drown an entire ship's company at a dash by running on the rocks.⁵⁸

Without the spirit and fortitude for a naval career, a boy's gentility and the virtues of his social rank mattered little to commanders like Collingwood. Young James Gardner recounted the instance of a fellow midshipman so terrified by the prospect of engagement that he "ran from his quarters and positively hid in the coppers! and had put on the drummer's jacket" as a means of disguise. The offending midshipman "got well flogged" by the boatswain for his cowardice.⁵⁹

The initiative exhibited by fifteen year-old Frederick Gilly aboard the *Gibraltar* in 1811 indicated a demeanor far more suitable for an officer. Determined to demonstrate his courage by participating in a potentially dangerous mission ashore, Frederick stowed away in one of the ship's boats after a senior officer refused to include him in the landing party. Frederick revealed himself only after it was too late to return to the ship and fought bravely in the ensuing action amidst heavy musket fire.⁶⁰ Although details of Frederick's parentage are unknown, his behaviour exemplified the kind of heroic and gentlemanly conduct expected of budding officers. A vigorous, oftentimes blind pursuit of honor,

⁵⁸ Lord Collingwood to his sister, Mrs. Stead, April 18, 1809, in Hughes, *Correspondence*, p. 274.

⁵⁹ Gardner, *Recollections*, ed. Hamilton, p. 42.

⁶⁰ NMM JOD/148, "Diary of a Midshipman Pysent."

regardless of the risks, set the standard for young gentlemen with a desire to rise in their profession, particularly if little interest could be called upon to boost their career.

While it would be unfair and inaccurate to generalize that aristocratic young gentlemen exhibited less of the “right stuff,” resting instead on the laurels of influence, it is safe to argue that for those without interest the options were few. An anonymous young officer summed up the limitations for the unconnected: “a fellow has now no chance of promotion unless he jumps into the muzzle of a gun and crawls out of the touchhole [sic].”⁶¹ Such a lament suggested that little or no outside influence favored this young gentleman, a shortcoming which left only one route to recognition – that of uncommon valor. In the years following Trafalgar the opportunity for displays of “desperate service”⁶² faded along with the grand fleet action and the last avenues to appointment by merit narrowed to a virtual impasse, clogged by social precedence and an infrastructure that supported the older order.

The economics of officer entry also reflected the narrowing opportunities for boys at sea. As captain’s servants, boys, and first class volunteers received no pay; families were expected to provide an allowance to cover a young man’s messing, schooling (if a schoolmaster was present aboard ship), uniforms, and general expenses. The amount demanded for this allowance rose dramatically over the course of the century. In 1733 five guineas sufficed a peer’s son who sought a position as a captain’s protégé, while in 1748 John Jervis, who later became the Earl St. Vincent, was packed off with a mere £20. By the time William Dillon went to sea in 1790 his captain required a minimum allowance of £50 a year, a sum that allowed boys “to live up to their gentlemanly

⁶¹ Joseph Conrad, “The Heroic Age,” in *The Mirror of the Sea* (Marlboro, VT: Marlboro Press, 1988), p. 165.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

claims.”⁶³ Such an amount also eliminated a good number of potential recruits from the professional and lower orders. Without family interest in the form of Captain Maurice Suckling, who absorbed much of the expense, it is doubtful that Nelson’s father, a Norfolk parson, could have raised the money to send his son to sea.⁶⁴ Finances thus narrowed the field considerably and endowed a naval career with greater social prestige.

It is interesting that Dillon, over the course of his memoirs from 1790 until about 1796, mentioned frequently the gentlemanly nature of his messmates, but following his appointment to acting-lieutenant in 1796, noted a general “falling off of gentility” in the Royal Navy’s junior-officer corps. On this score Lewis suggests, “It would perhaps be comforting to think that Dillon and his friends were on the way out, and that a more democratic officer entry was on its way in. But History does not bear this out.”⁶⁵ Perhaps a slightly older, more class-conscious⁶⁶ Dillon began to register the difference between a gentleman by birth and connections, and one deemed so merely by manners and appearance. Dillon’s concern that naval officers ought possess, at the very least, a gentlemanly pedigree is indicative of the swing towards a narrower social field of opportunity. Dillon and his contemporaries represented the next generation of command beyond the self-made peers like Jervis, Nelson, and Collingwood. While the legacy of these heroic figures shaped conceptions of officer-like conduct and honor for generations to come, the tradition which automatically equated a lieutenant’s commission with genteel status now required qualification. For captains like Dillon, the future of the Royal

⁶³ Rodger, *Command*, p. 388, and Lewis, *Social*, p. 38.

⁶⁴ A.T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), p. 5.

⁶⁵ Lewis, *Social*, p. 43.

⁶⁶ Dillon used the terms “better-classed” and “of that class” frequently. Sir William Henry Dillon, *A Narrative of My Professional Adventures, 1790-1839*, Vol. II, ed. Michael A. Lewis, Navy Records Society, Vol. XCVII (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne and Co., 1956), pp. 90,138.

Navy's officer corps relied as much on circumstances of birth as on suitability of temperament and conduct. Dillon saw the introduction of Admiralty "nomination" in 1815 as a boon to the social integrity of the service rather than an infringement on what would then have been his own prerogative as captain:

I was glad to find that some kind of regulation was to be enforced in that direction, as it was well known that many Captains had placed improper youths on the Quarter Decks of the King's Ships. The Navy has much improved in consequence of that arrangement, and now you are nearly certain of having a young gentleman in the profession, whereas formerly there were many of very doubtful character in it.⁶⁷

Summary

By the time of the French Revolutionary Wars the trend that had begun with Prince William Henry's admission into the service as a quarterdeck boy became a fully-fledged movement, significant enough to draw the attention of many prominent naval commentators. The heightened social status of a naval career increased its popularity for the sons of aristocrats and the highest ranking gentlemen. While the Order in Council of 1794 decreased the number of official positions for officers-in-training, limiting the entry of first class boys and volunteers to "young gentlemen intended for sea service," demand for these positions multiplied. The result was a gradual but unmistakable rise in the proportion of entry-level positions being awarded to the sons of the social and political elite, a growth attested to by the number of "Honourables" passed as lieutenants in *Steel's Navy Lists* of the period.⁶⁸

The victims in this new social equation spanned the breadth of both social and naval ranks. While the Admiralty technically assumed no place in the selection and appointment of quarterdeck boys until 1815, captains found their prerogative squeezed

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 339.

⁶⁸ See Appendix A.

well before this time by social influences outside the navy and by political pressures forced down through the First Lord and the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. Constraints on a captain's freedom to appoint took their toll on those who, in the past, had been most favored – the sons of fellow officers and career warrants. Considering these boys most deserving by virtue of a father's service, old-school captains like Collingwood continued to select boys from the “professional” ranks. But as the Admiralty maintained its slow but inexorable advance towards centralized control of appointments, even the most democratic commanders were forced to bow. By 1815 the transition from captain's selection to Admiralty-approved nomination was complete, as was the process which facilitated the social polarization of the midshipman's berth. By the 1850s, the cockpit would be dominated by the sons of aristocrats and gentlemen.⁶⁹ The separation of the social orders – lower-deck commoners and quarterdeck gentlemen – remained a prominent feature of the late Georgian and Victorian navies.

In terms of broader social trends, the Royal Navy's transition from a largely independent institution that thrived on its ability to subvert the order of traditional eighteenth-century society, to a centralized bureaucracy governed by forces from above, supports Clarke's theory of a continuing *ancien régime*. While the nature of the Royal Navy in the first half of the eighteenth century exemplified Langford's notion of an evolving social order, one which valued mobility and opportunity based on ability, such characteristics were permitted only by default. While the Royal Navy remained a socially undesirable profession-of-last-resort, the selection of young officers operated “below the radar” of the social elite. As soon as tastes and perceptions of a naval career changed, so

⁶⁹ Rodger, “Officers,” p. 146.

did the ability of the Royal Navy to maintain its independence in matters of appointment and advancement. As such, the demands of the old order triumphed despite the protracted death throes of a more egalitarian Royal Navy. As a gentlewoman and author with two brothers in active naval service, Jane Austen was well placed to observe high society's attitudes towards the opportunities afforded by the Royal Navy. In 1815 she captured one popular position in the voice of Sir Walter Elliott, Baronet. Elliott objected to the naval profession

as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of . . . A man is in greater danger in the navy of being insulted by the rise of those whose father, his father might have disdained to speak to . . . than in any other line.⁷⁰

Such commentary reflected wider perceptions among members of the elite that favored even greater separation of the social orders. It was an opinion that William Dillon would have wholeheartedly supported.

Clark's system of patrician hegemony, which allows flexibility and movement within the framework of an old social order, explains trends evident in the Royal Navy by the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In a profession which depended on skill for survival, advancement based on professional ability remained the central organizing principle of command. What changed, however, was opportunity. Precedence given to the sons of the elite in the competition for limited appointments brought a new crop of aristocratic and gentlemanly hopefuls into positions of naval command. For the new breed of quarterdeck boys, and for the majority of those they commanded, such a trend represented the ordinary extension of privileges to the natural leaders of society.

⁷⁰ Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, intro. and notes by Susan Ostrov Weisser (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 1993), p. 19.

PART II – THE AUTHORITY OF YOUNG GENTLEMEN

The Evolution of Naval Authority in the Eighteenth Century

The wooden world of the late-seventeenth century was a far cry from the scenes of rigid discipline, professionalism, and cast-iron authority so evocative of Nelson's navy. At Lowestoft in 1666, the incompetent and unpopular Admiral Lord Buckingham begged his men not to throw him overboard and barely escaped with his life from several shipboard riots.¹ At the opposite end of the scale, Thomas Masterman Hardy, *Victory's* captain at Trafalgar, proudly worked his ship in silence, directing his well-oiled human machine with hand signals and the occasional twittering of the boatswain's call. Despite the unmistakable transition from a state of "chaotic discipline" to one of high-order efficiency, the Royal Navy continued to operate on a tenuous thread of authority that "rested more on persuasion than force."² The mathematics of shipboard life proved that consent was the crucial factor as eight hundred men could not be commanded by thirty or forty officers and boys without both tacit and explicit approval.

The Admiralty of the previous century had demonstrated surprising obedience to the demands of its seamen, allowing them to dispose of captains who did not meet their professional standards, as in the Rainsborough mutiny of 1648.³ By the turn of the eighteenth century, such liberal attitudes towards mariners were largely extinct, although the potential threat posed by the lower deck remained foremost in the minds of all sensible commanders. The Admiralty's first attempt to codify discipline and standards of

¹ John Ehrman, *The Navy in the War of William III 1689-1697, its State and Direction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 22.

² Rodger, *Command*, p. 320, and *Wooden World*, p. 120.

³ Oppenheim, *Administration*, p. 249, and J. R. Powell, *The Navy in the English Civil War*, intro. by C. V. Wedgwood (London: Archon Books, 1962), p. 156.

duty came with the issue of the first *General Printed Instructions*⁴ in 1731. *Additional Regulations and Instructions* produced in 1733 and 1756 dealt increasingly with issues relating to the living conditions and work expectations of mariners and reflected concerns for the treatment of crews. The advent of Captains' Order Books in 1759 brought to light the shortcomings of the Admiralty's instructions and emphasized the need for individual captains to clarify issues that affected daily life aboard ship. By the mid to late 1780s, concern for the treatment of seaman was evident in a number of order books including, rather surprisingly, those drafted by Prince William Henry, Duke of Clarence and captain of HMS *Pegasus*. Though a martinet on issues of protocol, discipline, dress, and cleanliness, Clarence demanded that "no seamen, marine or other person in the ship is to be struck or otherways ill used on any pretence whatsoever by any officer or gentleman . . ." and that ". . . the people [an official term for a ship's company] [are] never to be interrupted at their meals but on the most pressing occasions."⁵ Such orders were in wide circulation by the early 1790s and mirrored a general respect for the most basic rights of seamen.

Yet the concessions proved insufficient to ameliorate the hardships facing mariners of the age. In 1797 tensions erupted in the greatest internal crisis of the eighteenth-century Royal Navy – the Spithead mutiny. Unlike its successor at the Nore, the mutineers of the Channel Fleet at Portsmouth achieved their aims with dignity, eloquence, and moderation, forcing those in positions of power to re-evaluate the capabilities of the average tar and the license granted to naval officers. The responses of

⁴ Lavery, *Shipboard*, p. 3, suggests this was the most common contemporary title. Also known as *Naval Instructions and Regulations and Instructions for His Majesty's Service at Sea*.

⁵ Duke of Clarence, "Captain's Orders, HMS *Pegasus*, 1786-88," Articles 18 and 24, in Lavery, *Shipboard*, pp. 94-95.

individual captains to the mutiny were, however, varied. St. Vincent reacted with characteristic ruthlessness, implementing a harsh system of discipline for both the men and officers.

The severity of his methods did not suit captains and admirals who recognized more effective means of managing a ship's company. Many noted that humane treatment of the men and a heightened consideration for their comfort often delivered more immediate and more enduring results. Concern for the use and abuse of seamen, particularly on the issue of their being called on deck unnecessarily, led Captain Keats of HMS *Superb* to order that "the commanding officer is directed to avoid so much as possible the calling of all hands but when the service to be performed cannot be executed by the watch and idlers. . . ."⁶ Directions of this nature were echoed in many order books of the period. Captain Anselm John Griffiths expanded upon such ideas in his

Observations on Some Points of Seamanship written in 1811:

Another thing which annoys the ship's company is the calling of all hands for what the watch can do. They know as well as you do when there is a necessity and they come cheerfully when they see that necessity, but it is natural they should feel annoyed at being taken from their amusements or little private employments because an officer they ought to look up to either does not know what strength is requisite or is unmindful of their comfort.⁷

Directives such as this reflected not only a heightened sensibility for the patience of lower-deck men but for the dangers of officers who appeared incompetent.

These examples of evolving attitudes towards the proper use of naval authority suggested a measure of change in the social dynamics of the shipboard hierarchy. In wider social terms, the effects of commercialism and an expanding middle class forced

⁶ NMM RUSI/110, "Captain's Orders," Captain Keats, HMS *Superb*, 1804, Art. 7.

⁷ Captain Anselm Griffiths, "Observations on Some Points of Seamanship with Practical Hints on Naval Economy," in Lavery, *Shipboard*, p. 359.

the acceptance of more liberal attitudes towards the lower and middling orders.

Radicalism in the form of revolutionary politics, leveling religion, and Romantic visions of “the rights of man” penetrated all strata of society, inspiring the lower orders as effectively as upper-class intellectuals. But the revolution in France proved too bloody for English tastes and the warnings of Edmund Burke resonated with terrible clarity.

The mutinies of 1797 could hardly have been better timed to capitalize on a well-matured sense of impending social doom brought about by the political threats from both Jacobins and the United Irishmen. Yet, the apolitical demands of the mutineers at Portsmouth suggested only a tepid challenge to the old order; while Admiralty negotiators downplayed the severity of the mutineers’ threat as a means of containing the potentially contagious ideas of rebellion which might infect other fleets and English society at large. As such, parties on both sides of the Spithead mutiny worked to preserve traditional social hierarchies, displaying what Clark describes as an unspoken “solidarity” in English conceptions of the kingdom and the role of its subjects. While conflict in a realm so economically and socially diverse was inevitable, the two pillars of English society, law and religion, combined to reaffirm the divine right of the elite to rule at sea and on land. The bloodless success of the Spithead mutiny arose from the moderation of the seamen involved, their deference to the authority of both the crown and the Admiralty, and a complete renunciation of political motives. Conversely, “Parker’s Floating Republic” as the HMS *Sandwich* came to be known while under the control of Seaman Richard Parker (a disgraced midshipman) during the Nore mutiny, failed utterly

and ended with Parker and twenty-seven of his collaborators hanged from the yardarm of their shattered “Republic”.⁸

Other apparently progressive social measures such as the Duke of Clarence’s concern for his men at mealtimes, merely repeated the most fundamental of time-honored concessions awarded to England’s mariners and reflected the understanding that navies, as well as armies, fought on their stomachs. The liberal attitudes espoused by Anselm Griffiths did not undermine the authority of command but, in fact, encouraged higher standards of professionalism and honor among officers, thereby eliciting greater respect from the lower deck which cemented quarterdeck hegemony. As professional standards for officers sharpened with the onset of the Napoleonic Wars, the natural authority of aristocrats and gentlemen may have demanded polishing, but nonetheless emerged as the choice of British seamen. The opinion that the men preferred a smattering of gentility in their commanders⁹ echoed widespread contemporary beliefs in the old hierarchy, and the stability it represented. Such notions challenge Rodger’s observation that “the 1797 Mutinies fundamentally changed the attitudes of officers and men throughout the Navy. . . .”¹⁰ The trickle-down effect of these popular sentiments on the authority, both practical and theoretical, of midshipmen and quarterdeck boys is examined below.

Quarterdeck Boys as a Measure of Change

Adjustments to Admiralty policy regarding the nature of command and the manner in which it wielded authority were best instituted at the entry level. As such, the authority granted to quarterdeck boys, the duties expected of them, and the bounds of

⁸ Arthur Herman, *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 351.

⁹ Cullen, “Memoirs,” pp. 84-85

¹⁰ Rodger, *Command*, p. 450.

their acceptable behavior provided a telling measure of social climates. An examination of internal factors such as Admiralty regulations, orders set by individual captains, and the influence of the lower deck combined with a look at external factors including religion, politics, and education provides a fuller picture of the influences that affected the authority of quarterdeck boys. The play of internal and external factors appeared in characterizations of the new shipboard hierarchy – a structure that aligned more closely with its civilian counterpart as the Great Wars progressed. Despite fluctuations and challenges to the social order of the Royal Navy throughout the period, the social world aboard Georgian men-of-war, ultimately supported an *ancien régime*.

Internal Sources of Authority

The Admiralty

A portion of a young gentleman's authority aboard ship resulted from Admiralty directives that reflected the policies of the Privy Council. Orders in Council addressing royal policy on naval manning and operational issues, as well as the demands of various First Lords and Admiralty boards, inspired various drafts of the Royal Navy's *Regulations and Instructions*. The first edition in 1731 outlined the functions of midshipmen and quarterdeck boys and their status in the shipboard hierarchy in only the barest sense. The 1756 regulations attempted to clarify a young gentleman's status with the introduction of a uniform "in order to their carrying the appearance which is necessary to distinguish their class to be in the rank of gentlemen, and give them better credit for executing the commands of their superior officers. . . ." ¹¹ In the 1806 draft, midshipmen appeared to have moved beyond the insecurities associated with the appearance of authority, as the articles dealt primarily with expectations of their

¹¹ "Additional Regulations and Instructions, 1756," Art. XL, in Lavery, *Shipboard*, p. 51

competency as seamen, able to “hand, reef and steer;” as administrators, able to maintain accurate logs; and as leaders of men, responsible for the cleanliness, sobriety, proficiency, and general welfare of their sub-divisions.¹²

Another source of authority from the top, which related to young gentlemen as much as to admirals, came from of the “Articles of War.” Established by the Commonwealth navy, amended by George II in 1747, and again in 1757, the Articles prescribed thirty-six points of law designed to accommodate all disciplinary contingencies, from drunkenness and insubordination to cowardice and murder. Articles 19, 20, and 22¹³ addressed breaches of conduct with respect to shipboard hierarchies and cemented the authority of the quarterdeck, its boys included, with the threat of death looming over any lower-deck seaman or subordinate officer who dared rattle the chain of command.

Both these sources protected the authority of young gentleman with the weight of law. As a cornerstone of English society, the immutability of these laws remained unquestioned, even by those who perished under their rule. During the Nore mutiny, one seaman decided to spare the life of young Lieutenant Nieven who had, the previous day sentenced the man to a flogging. The seaman explained his reasoning, “You did, [flog me] Sir, *but I deserved it.*” The rest of the seaman’s response spoke to wider social justifications: “You are a gentleman, and a good officer. You never punished men but when they were in fault, and you did it as an officer ought to do.” A flogging from a gentleman was clearly more acceptable than one from an officer such as the First

¹² “Regulations, 1806,” Art. IX, XII, in Lavery, *Shipboard*, pp. 55, 57.

¹³ www.io.com/gibbonsb/articles.html, “The Articles of War,” 1749, accessed 1/12/06.

Lieutenant of the same ship who was “a *blackguard* and *no* gentleman.”¹⁴ Naval law typically passed without question, particularly when meted out by worthy possessors of the natural authority granted by aristocratic or gentlemanly birth. The system of authority handed down from the highest levels of Admiralty administration depended to a large extent on the elite status of the messenger. This fact further encouraged the practice of grooming the sons of noblemen and gentlemen to positions of shipboard power.

Captains

Beyond the general responsibilities outlined in the *Regulations and Instructions* and the legal protocol stated in the “Articles of War,” the functional duties and authority of midshipmen depended on the preferences of individual captains. In practical terms, expectations for the social and professional behaviour of quarterdeck boys rested almost entirely with a commander. Even as captains began to lose their monopoly on the selection of young gentlemen during the early stages of the French Revolutionary Wars, they retained practical jurisdiction over the boys in their charge. Decisions to pardon or punish, mentor or neglect, send a boy into deadly danger or keep him in relative safety below decks, all came down to the management style of individual captains. Peter Cullen Esq., surgeon’s mate aboard the frigate *Squirrel*, commented on the effectiveness of Captain Drury’s husbandry, “he was an excellent man for bringing up young gentlemen – the midshipmen, for to be eminent officers in His Majesty’s Navy, and which many of them turned out to be.”¹⁵

Management style was often shaped by other factors including the ship’s rating which dictated the number of midshipmen aboard and the number of officers available to

¹⁴ Cullen, “Memoirs,” pp. 84-85. Cullen’s italics.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

supervise them, the vessel's commission and cruising orders, and the age and competency of the boys themselves. As such, generalizations on the types of duties and the extent of authority granted young gentlemen are difficult to draw and contradictions abound.

At fifteen John Harvey Boteler found himself second-in-command of a raiding party sent to destroy a flotilla of gunboats. His fellow officer was a daring boy, several years his junior, named Billy "Hell Flames" Lucas. Yet on other days, Boteler described his mates indulging in games of leap-frog, childish practical jokes, and frivolous pursuits, which, in the case of a young midshipman who fell and drowned while trying to catch a bird, could prove deadly.¹⁶ Dillon too, described the strange dichotomy of boys growing up aboard men-of-war. As a stunted and scrawny thirteen year-old midshipman, Dillon was forced to defend his ship's watering boat from the predations of a group of Indiamen bent on ransacking his stores. Dillon followed the account of this adventure with a description of his messmates, including a fellow of the same age who still sucked his thumb.¹⁷ Captains' standards for acceptable behaviour varied as widely as their methods of exacting complicity. Captain Edward Riou of the *Amazon* threatened dismissal from the service for young gentlemen who were idle or not continually "acquiring some useful information,"¹⁸ while the force of Collingwood's personality kept subordinates in check: ". . . a look of displeasure from him was as bad as a dozen at the gangway from another man."¹⁹

While the practice of putting boys to work at an early age was common enough in eighteenth-century England, the uniqueness of a career as a naval officer, which required

¹⁶ Boteler, *Recollections*, pp. 18, 9, 28.

¹⁷ Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, pp. 82, 84.

¹⁸ Edward Riou, "Captain's Orders, HMS *Amazon*, 1799," in Lavery, *Shipboard*, p. 129.

¹⁹ Robert Hay, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 491

a rare combination of professional skill, book-learning, and understanding of human nature, appeared to place the pre-pubescent boy at a distinct disadvantage. Were it not for two factors – the belief that the only possible way to acclimatize to a naval life was to begin young and the high priority ascribed by the government to training naval officers as the front line of England’s defenses – the task might have been left to older recruits who no longer felt the need to shoot marbles on the poop deck in their spare time.²⁰

Collingwood recognized the flaws in the system: “The fact is, that these boys are made Lieutenants too soon, and before their heads can bear their good fortune. It seems so easy to them that they do not set that value on their stations which they ought.”²¹ Captains mitigated the problems caused by under-ripe, over-empowered juniors by weighing two factors in the authority equation – the capabilities of the individual and the tolerance of the ship’s company.

While ability, initiative, and maturity counted for much in terms of the duties entrusted to young gentlemen, captains supported a boy’s authority as a natural right of those who walked the quarterdeck. In doing so they reaffirmed their own privileges of command. According to an early biographer, Collingwood “used to tell the ship’s company that he was determined that the youngest midshipman should be obeyed as implicitly as himself, and that he should punish with great severity any instance to the contrary.”²² Collingwood also understood the importance of teaching young officers to cope with the pressures of managing potentially explosive human-resource situations:

When a mid. made a complaint [against a seaman], he [Collingwood] would order the man for punishment the next day; and in the interval, calling the boy down to

²⁰ Rodger, *Command*, p. 508.

²¹ Cuthbert Collingwood to Lord Howick, November 7, 1806, in Newnham Collingwood, *Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 343.

²² Newnham Collingwood, *Correspondence*, Vol. I, p.70.

him, would say, “In all probability the fault was yours; but whether or not, I am sure it would go to your heart to see a man old enough to be your father disgraced and punished on your account; and it will therefore give me a good opinion of your disposition, if, when he is brought out, you ask for his pardon.” When this recommendation acting as it did like an order, was complied with, and the lad interceded for the prisoner, Captain Collingwood would make great apparent difficulty in yielding, but at length would say, “This young gentlemen has pleaded so humanely for you, that in hope you will feel a due gratitude to him for his benevolence, I will for this time, overlook your offence.”²³

The careful management of a boy’s authority, taking into account the qualities of the individual, the morale of the ship’s people, and the need to support the unquestioned authority of the quarterdeck, was essential in maintaining a man-of-war’s social balance and operational effectiveness.

Captains could also set the tone for interactions between the lower deck and quarterdeck by determining how and when the line of separation was upheld.

Quarterdeck boys and midshipmen, as hybrids of both ratings and officers, embodied the dividing line and all its ambiguities. Article 22 of the “Articles of War” promised death to any man who struck or threatened to strike a superior officer. In practice, this law extended even to touching a superior. Dillon, however, recorded that as a ten year-old captain’s servant aboard the seventy-four gun *Saturn*: “. . . one or two of the seamen devoted themselves to me, and would often carry me in their arms to explain several parts of the ship in answer to my inquiries.”²⁴ No sailor who valued life would have dared take such liberties, even with a pint-sized officer, unless his captain explicitly authorized such behaviour. The *Saturn*’s Captain Linzee clearly saw some benefit in the interaction of gentlemanly youngsters and “sea daddies,” even when they came from the lower deck.

James Gardner, too, recounted the story of Mr. Stack, a lower-deck man rated

²³ Ibid., p.70.

²⁴ Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, p. 15.

midshipman to keep the boys in order “as the father of our mess.” Stack had “an ugly way of showing his kindness. When in good temper (which was seldom) he would say ‘My son,’ when he addressed any of us; but generally [it was], ‘I’ll split your ear’.”²⁵ It is unlikely that such behavior would have been attempted, let alone tolerated, without a captain’s consent.

The authority transferred to quarterdeck boys by captains could therefore work in either direction, to separate young officers from the ship’s company or to assimilate them when appropriate. A captain’s ability to strike the right balance often determined the success of his junior officer corps and the smooth operation of his ship.

The Lower Deck

More important perhaps than any source of authority from above, was that enabled by those below. According to the fundamental principles of old-order stability – paternalism and deference – authority could be upheld only by “widespread tacit and explicit support.”²⁶ The ability of midshipmen to carry out their duties rested equally on this principle. Young gentlemen as captain’s protégés represented the elite of shipboard society; their orders echoed the captain’s and therefore required equal attention. Seamen relied on the knowledge and expertise of those above, not only for their day to day safety in working the ship and steering a course, but for wartime decisions that would ensure the safety of their ship and their nation. On the opposite side of the relationship, the men were just as vital. Without the labor of hundreds of mariners, such complex war machines could not function. In this way, the strange dynamics of young and inexperienced boys commanding veteran able seamen was a prime example of the ancient social contract at

²⁵ Gardner, *Under Hatches*, ed. Lloyd, p. 50.

²⁶ Clark, *Society*, p. 24.

work – a contract based on mutual need. A midshipman’s fair and respectful treatment of those “before the mast” fulfilled the unspoken agreement inherent in a society run on principles of patrician domination. Violation of this “contract” led not only to problems of morale but to a breakdown of the only immediate support mechanism available to officers – that of their men. William Robinson a.k.a. Jack Nastyface recounted the consequences of breaking this implicit bond. He described one rather sadistic twelve year-old midshipman:

whose sole delight was to insult the feelings of the seamen and furnish pretexts to get them punished . . . I have often seen him get on the carriage of a gun, call a man to him, and kick him about the thighs and body, and with his fist would beat him about the head, and these, although prime seamen, at the same time dared not murmur.

Retribution came with a savage engagement during which no mariner thought to look out for the boy. “. . . [H]e was killed on the quarter-deck by a grape-shot, his body greatly mutilated, his entrails being driven and scattered against the larboard side. . . .” Cheers accompanied news of the boy’s demise and, as Robinson noted, “his death was hailed as the triumph over an enemy.”²⁷ This graphic depiction emphasized the fact that leadership existed and was maintained by the approval and support of those below. It also spoke to the consequences of unfulfilled paternalistic duties at the command level.

The ultimate expression of a breakdown in naval order came with the 1797 mutinies. The uprising represented a labor strike in support of a pay raise (seamen’s wages had not increased since 1652), better quality victuals, improved conditions for the wounded, and amendments to the bounty system of recruitment which unfairly rewarded

²⁷ William Robinson [Jack Nastyface, pseud.], *Nautical Economy, or Jack Nastyface, Memoirs of a Seaman* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), pp. 55-57.

those who avoided volunteering for as long as possible.²⁸ The Spithead mutiny demonstrated that while lower-deck men displayed an extraordinary tolerance for neglect and ill-treatment, such virtues had their limit.

H. G. Thursfield suggested other causal factors related directly to the disintegration of the paternalistic code.²⁹ Three years earlier in 1794, a mutiny took place aboard Captain Thomas Troubridge's *Culloden*, initiated by the crew's belief in the unseaworthiness of their ship. Captain Thomas Pakenham quelled the uprising by promising, it was later rumored, that the mutineers would receive his protection and a full pardon for their actions. Five mutineers were, in fact, hanged, destroying the trust which formed an integral part of the naval relationship: ". . . after this no seaman would believe an officer's word of honour."³⁰ The memory of this incident fuelled a belligerence in the Spithead mutineers, who calmly stated their ultimate loyalty to king and country and dug in their heels on the issues at hand.

The orderly and respectful conduct of the Spithead mutineers did, however, rouse the sympathies of Lord Bridport and the First Lord, Earl Spencer and brought concessions on most of the demands raised. Such rational behaviour also elicited a royal pardon which, after two weeks of negotiation, brought the Portsmouth mutiny to a peaceful end. In light of the volatile political climate circulating in England at the time, stirred by French Jacobins and United Irishmen, the success of a fleet-wide mutiny roused the passions of mariners and the fears of officers. Many captains now trod lightly on the quarterdeck, shy of exacting punishments for even the most unequivocal offences. Others, like St. Vincent, reacted with unflinching severity to any whisper of discord. The

²⁸ Rodger, *Command*, p. 446.

²⁹ Thursfield, *Naval Journals*, p. 352.

³⁰ Rodger, *Command*, p. 445.

result was a cleavage at the highest levels of naval operations, and a separation of the old and new philosophies of command and management of shipboard social hierarchies. Conservatives like Collingwood upheld the paternalistic code, believing that the best service he could do a body of men was to keep them well ordered and free of the need for independent thought on wider political and social matters. “It has always been a maxim with me,” wrote Collingwood, “to engage and occupy my men, and to take such care for them that they should have nothing to think of for themselves, beyond the current business of the day.”³¹ Such calm sentiments reflected none of St. Vincent’s iron-fisted reactionary discipline. Collingwood was famous for his disdain of corporal punishment and his demand for the respectful treatment of seamen, instructing young gentlemen that “if you do not know a man’s name call him ‘sailor’, and not ‘you-sir’ and other such appellations; they are offensive and improper.”³² Collingwood’s respect for the average mariner nonetheless existed within the old seigneurial system, governed as it was by concepts of paternalism and deference. Yet, the mutinies managed to inspire subtle changes in the paternalistic system.

By 1803 the storm created by the French terror, and Wolf Tone was all but spent although Rodger sees evidence of “a long-term evolution in attitudes to naval discipline . . . matters which had been taken for granted before were now the subject of much thought and comment, by both officers and ratings.”³³ Most significant was the mariner’s eagerness to demand that officers treat him with respect. New attitudes that gained popularity with more liberal captains promoted the British tar as a rational, professional,

³¹ Lord Collingwood to J.E. Blackett, May 1, 1798, in Newnham Collingwood, *Correspondence*, Vol. I, pp. 88-89.

³² Newnham Collingwood, *Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 72.

³³ Rodger, *Command*, p. 489.

mature creature, possessed of certain inalienable rights. By 1811 Captain Anselm Griffiths noted a transformation in the men serving aboard British men-of-war: “Seamen are nowadays a thinking set of people and a large portion of them possess no inconsiderable share of common sense, the most useful sense after all.” With respect to an officer’s authority he offered a thinly-veiled warning:

[Seamen] are capable certainly of judging when they are well treated, whether those in authority over them exercise it with mildness and due attention to their comforts, and it is natural to suppose they sit lighter under the yoke of a man who they see knows and does his own duty.³⁴

While Griffiths’ opinions might be interpreted as heralding a new naval order, his characterization of seamen as intelligent, skilled professionals also served another purpose, one that undermined notions of a fundamental social reform. Griffiths used such observations to demand more of those who walked the quarterdeck, both in terms of their respectful and gentlemanly treatment of inferiors and their professionalism. His criticism of officers’ conduct sought to push the standards of command higher, thereby widening the gap between quarterdeck and lower deck. Just as the principle of rule by consent remained firmly at the root of all naval authority, the need for officers to distance themselves from the men through genteel conduct, superior knowledge, and unquestionable skill reinforced the old paradigm and further justified the natural dominance of the patrician classes. The opening lines of Griffiths’ opus on the state of the Royal Navy in the new century summarized his position on the governance of a ship’s people and the distinction between the ranks: “. . . I am not only a strenuous advocate for correct discipline, but a decided enemy to the littleness of character known by the

³⁴ Griffiths, “Observations,” p. 355.

appellation of courting popularity.”³⁵ A tightly ordered hierarchy remained central to Griffiths’ sense of “modern” command, while a heightened sense of formality in shipboard relationships supported notions of a continuing *ancien régime*. As Rodger notes, “the senior officers of a generation before had been accustomed to a sort of rough intimacy with their men which had disappeared by the end of the century. . . .”³⁶ In this context, Griffiths’ theories can be seen less in terms of liberal innovation and more as a solution to the problem of changing social dynamics aboard men-of-war. His understanding of the modern seaman also suggested a process by which officers could, and should, distance themselves from a ship’s company.

Young William Dillon provided evidence that even the “new breed” seaman supported notions of the natural superiority of noblemen and gentlemen. Dillon recalled an experience during his time as a midshipman in which seamen carried him and his comrades across mud flats on their backs to reach a stranded tender. He also convinced the men to carry out two French civilian prisoners who were “almost entitled to the name of gentlemen.” As Lewis notes, “[Dillon] evidently took it for granted that he and his messmates would avoid muddy feet by being carried . . . and they were not disappointed.” Gentility apparently also “transcended nationality, and even war,” and despite the initial protestations of the crew at having to render service to their enemies, the fact that the men complied “only seems to show that, at heart, they also attached a great importance to the idea of gentility.” Dillon’s example revealed little development towards a more democratic system of command. Lewis notes that, “. . . any regret that his subordinate’s feet should become muddy while his remained clean” were non-existent,

³⁵ Ibid., p. 354.

³⁶ Rodger, *Command*, p. 491.

“ . . . the much more modern conception of sharing discomfort with his men – simply did not enter his head at all.”³⁷

By the time of the Great Wars, acceptance of a midshipman by a company of mariners often required a measure of gentility, whether by title, wealth, education or at the very least, appearance. Seamen were wary of midshipmen who had “come in through the hawse-hole,”³⁸ as young men who had overstepped their bounds. Jealousies combined with a sense of lower-deck solidarity in the ultimate expression of an old-order mentality. *A Mariner of England’s* William Richardson hinted at his preference for a tightly ordered shipboard society: “in all my experience at sea I have found seamen grateful for good usage, and yet they like to see subordination kept up as they know the duty could not be carried on without it.”³⁹ As late as 1847, Seaman John Bechervaise wrote of his faith in professionalism and a strict hierarchy of naval order:

I would always choose a ship in which every duty was attended to strictly, in preference to one in which a man did almost as he liked. Indeed, I’ve frequently heard old seamen say (when two ships were in commission and both wanting hands), “I’ll go with Captain _____: he’s a taut one, but he is Captain of his own ship.”⁴⁰

The demand for greater standards of professionalism amongst quarterdeck boys addressed another potential source of authority from the lower deck. Earning the respect of a crew through displays of courage, intelligence, professional skill, and/or effective leadership offered one of the surest roads to success and promotion. In this formula, Rodger notes the social paradox underlying the naval hierarchy. Traditionally, “gentlemen were the natural leaders of society because of who they were, not what they

³⁷ Michael Lewis, intro. to Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, pp. 92, 64.

³⁸ The hawser, a cable that secured a ship’s anchor, originated in the cable tiers and therefore implied the lower deck. The term also connoted rat-like qualities.

³⁹ William Richardson, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 492.

⁴⁰ John Bechervaise, quoted in Lewis, *Social*, p. 276.

had learned.” But naval authority also required a high level of professional skill. Young gentlemen “who had been taught common skills like knotting and splicing by common seamen, were unusual creatures in eighteenth-century society.”⁴¹ Within naval culture, however, proficiency was expected of junior officers regardless of their social pedigree as it determined the extent of practical authority accorded a young gentleman by the mariners in his charge. Authority as the sum of natural rights and professional merit characterized the Royal Navy’s command structure throughout the Great Wars and reflected the basis of “a new underlying ideal, one in which duty was beginning to infiltrate the concept of honour.”⁴² In this is evidence of Clark’s concept of social flexibility and the ability of patrician society to absorb changes in order to reinforce its dominance. The more conscientious attitudes adopted by officers and midshipmen towards their inferiors in the early years of the nineteenth century reaffirmed the old standards of paternal duty, from which young gentlemen reaped the rewards of heightened loyalty and respect from the lower deck.

The Rouge’s March

Amendments to the system of naval punishment also reflected more enlightened approaches to authority and discipline. The *Regulations and Instructions* of 1806 abolished the “gauntlet,” a punishment that required a ship’s company to whip an offender with knotted ropes as he walked past each man in succession. In 1809 the Admiralty forbade “starting,” the practice of striking crewmen for minor offences or to speed their work. Although this particular punishment continued in some ships, the official position on corporal brutality spoke volumes to the changing dynamics of

⁴¹ Rodger, *Command*, p. 392.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 513.

shipboard life. Samples of court martial records from the Seven Years War through the French Revolutionary Wars show that “the men particularly resented being struck by midshipmen,”⁴³ as starting and beating were common complaints brought against young gentlemen and petty officers. Seaman William Russell was absolved of further punishment for a charge of mutiny against Midshipman Henry Rycraft, “in consideration of the Blows he received from the Petty Officer.”⁴⁴ Rycraft had, in fact, beaten the seaman repeatedly about the head and face causing him to fall and injure himself further. In 1761 Seaman Thomas Smith accused Midshipman Ireland of the *Hampton Court* of verbally abusing him and striking him with a rattan, while Acting Lieutenant John Guy found himself dismissed from the service in 1792 for “cruel, unofficerlike conduct towards Samuel Brown, seaman. . . .”⁴⁵

While these examples were representative of a substantial number of violent demonstrations of a young gentleman’s authority they also suggested that, in some cases at least, its abuse would not be tolerated. From the commencement of the French Revolutionary Wars, and particularly after 1797, the court martial records revealed significantly fewer incidences of quarterdeck boys inflicting cruelty and violence upon a ship’s people and far more cases of their insolence, disobedience, and brutality towards superior officers. Of the fifty recorded courts martial of midshipmen and acting lieutenants from July 1797 through 1815, nearly 40 percent deal with varying levels of

⁴³ Ibid., p. 403.

⁴⁴ TNA: PRO ADM1/5299, Pt. 1, f. 160, Court Martial of William Russell, Seaman, March 10, 1760.

⁴⁵ TNA: PRO ADM1/5300, Court Martial of Thomas Smith, Seaman, November 26, 1761, and ADM12/27B, f.6. Court Martial of Acting 2nd Lt John Guy, November 14, 1792.

verbal or physical abuse towards superior officers,⁴⁶ by far the largest single category of charges recorded.

The shift appeared to coincide not only with the aftermath of mutiny but also paralleled the steady increase in the appearance of Honorables and the sons of high-ranking gentlemen aboard His Majesty's ships. This correlation hinted at the disdain noble and gentlemanly petty officers appear to have held for their less exalted superiors, suggesting that St. Vincent's lament for the "decay of subordination"⁴⁷ caused by the influx of young blue-bloods, indeed, had substance.

The Breakdown of Subordination

The popularity and prestige of a naval career for aristocratic and well-connected young gentlemen further obscured the quarterdeck boy's status which suspended him somewhere between the level of a low-grade warrant officer and commissioned rank. The infiltration of social rank into the once-separate world of service rank further muddied the waters of naval authority. The court martial of Midshipman Owen B. Williams, a gentleman's son who led a pack of other "well-born" midshipmen in a night attack on the master of HMS *Triumph* as the latter slept ashore, presented a case of youthful conceptions of social precedence exercising authority over naval rank. As an old-school warrant officer with no pretension to gentility, the *Triumph's* master presented an obvious target for the drunken young gentlemen. After beating the master about the head "with his fist or a stone," Williams opted for the ultimate degradation of rank, forcing the older man to "walk the streets nearly naked." The master testified that "he [Williams] called me a damned rascal, and [said] that I was not entitled to wear a sword . . . ,"

⁴⁶ TNA: PRO ADM12/27C, "Black Book," Vol. II, 1794-1807; and ADM12/27D, "Black Book," Vol. III, 1807-1815.

⁴⁷ Lord St. Vincent to Benjamin Tucker Esq., March 27, 1806, in Tucker, *St. Vincent*, Vol. II, p. 270.

charges that confirmed Williams' belief in the exclusivity of the rights of gentlemen. The court however, found Williams guilty, disrating him "to serve before the mast" as a common sailor.⁴⁸

Outside the jurisdiction of Admiralty law, assaults on naval authority from the midshipman's berth affected even the best-run ships. Collingwood wrote to J. E. Blackett of a fractious young gentleman who possessed both interest and family:

The conduct and behaviour of Mr. _____ has added very much to my vexation. A few days since, upon the most trivial occasion, he broke out into such a fit of frenzy and rage, and behaved to me in so contemptuous and extraordinary a manner, that I desired the First Lieutenant to order him off the deck. . . . The day following, he wrote a letter, not excusing his conduct, but rather justifying it and requesting to be discharged into any other ship.⁴⁹

Young John Boteler, too, described the degenerate behaviour of a fellow midshipman and gentleman's son he named "the Squire." Significant political connections had convinced the Squire that he was above the orders of his captain, such that when threatened with a flogging for one of his many offences, the young gentleman obtained a pocket pistol with which to defend his honor. Boteler persuaded the boy to give up his weapon, "convinced [that] had the captain sent for him in the cabin that he [the Squire] would have shot him."⁵⁰ Captain Gambier, losing his patience with a fourteen year-old Dillon exclaimed, ". . . you are a refractory young gentleman. I see how it is. You rely on your influential connections. Quit the Cabin directly."⁵¹ These examples tend to confirm Nelson's observation that with respect to young Honorables, ". . . they will always do as they

⁴⁸ TNA: PRO ADM12/27D, f. 43, Court Martial of Midshipman Owen B. Williams, January 3, 1810.

⁴⁹ Newnham Collingwood, *Correspondence*, Vol. I, pp. 63-64.

⁵⁰ Boteler, *Recollections*, pp. 42-43, 52.

⁵¹ Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, p. 110

please. Orders are not for them – at least I never knew yet one who obeyed.”⁵²

Lieutenants in charge of noble young gentlemen found themselves in particularly awkward situations. Preferment to the ranks of commander and post captain depended almost entirely on the patronage of well-connected captains, admirals, members of the Board of Admiralty, or political notables. The possibility of damaging one or more of these avenues to promotion by the mishandling of noble and highly-ranked quarterdeck boys made it difficult for commissioned officers to exercise the proper authority. Aboard the *Unité* in 1807, Robert Wilson recalled that even in a “ship of strict discipline,” First Lieutenant John Wilson could not (or at least did not) enforce the mastheading of a midshipman, Mr. McDougal, who refused to obey his orders. Rather than confining the boy for insolence and insubordination, Lieutenant Wilson waited for the return of his captain, who later saw to the boy’s punishment.⁵³

William Dillon taunted his schoolmaster to strike away with his cane then warned, “recollect that I am a gentleman, and beware of the consequence.”⁵⁴ Dillon also recalled an incident aboard the *Saturn* in 1791, which demonstrated the worst-possible consequences in disciplining the sons of notables. Mr. Leonard, a young gentleman of interest, refused his First Lieutenant’s orders to go to the masthead, considering himself above the status of such punishments. The lieutenant then ordered a gantline rigged in order to haul the boy aloft. Leonard was badly injured during the procedure and the “event became known throughout the Fleet, and caused a very strong sensation among

⁵² Lord Nelson to the Earl St. Vincent, June 21, 1797, in N. H. Nicholas, ed., *The Dispatches and Letters of Lord Nelson*, the Nicolas Edition, Vol. II, 1795-1797 (London: Chatham Publishing, 1997), p. 398.

⁵³ Wilson, “Journal,” pp. 128, 162.

⁵⁴ Dillon, *Adventures*, Vol. I, p. 26.

the Midshipmen, many of whom were of the first families in the country. Leonard was advised by several to proceed legally against the Lieutenant.”⁵⁵

Leonard did not take legal action; although wider consequences soon followed. Bitter pamphlets circulated by Edward Moore, midshipman of HMS *London* and “a gentleman of independent means,” sought to rally young Honorables throughout the fleet at Spithead in order to avenge the injustice done Mr. Leonard. While Moore was quickly tried, dismissed from the service, and confined to Marshalsea prison for a time, the aborted “Midshipmen’s Mutiny,” confirmed the worst fears of those captains and senior officers who recognized the problems inherent in the gentrification of the midshipman’s berth. The event also provided an example of the confusion, pervasive in the Royal Navy of the Great Wars, between social rank and naval rank.

Richard Woodman in his introduction to Lord Cochrane’s autobiography also notes tensions operating in the other direction. “. . . [I]t is equally true to say that his [Lord Cochrane’s] title automatically attracted a degree of prejudice and hostility from a naval service largely officered by steady, professional, middle-class men.”⁵⁶ Perhaps it was the solidarity of the titled and influential that led Admiral Philip Patton, one of the more democratic commentators in his field, to denounce the effects of equality amongst notables on the quarterdeck:

That high degree of familiarity between the officers of different ranks under the pretence of the equality of gentlemen, which may be compatible with the situation of men composing an army, but which must undermine obedience . . . is utterly destructive of discipline in a situation so confined as that of a ship. . . . that familiarity among the different ranks of officers must prove the destruction of subordination.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

⁵⁶ Richard Woodman, intro. to, *Autobiography of a Seaman*, by Admiral Lord Cochrane, p. xi.

⁵⁷ Admiral Philip Patton, “Strictures on Naval Discipline and the Conduct of a Ship of War, intended to produce a uniformity of opinion among sea officers,” c. 1807, extract in Lavery, *Shipboard*, pp. 622-23.

The resurgence of a patrician hegemony within the Royal Navy appeared to Patton and many of his contemporaries as destructive to the old paradigm of naval authority. Paradoxically, Royal Navy observers denounced the “new” trend that gave precedence to society’s elite, while lamenting the loss of “old” naval traditions that rewarded merit and restructured shipboard society in terms of service rank. Despite Jonathan Clark’s suggestion that “eighteenth century Englishmen had no sense of living through such a process of modernization . . . ,”⁵⁸ Patton’s discourses revealed at least some perception of change. The curious fact is that naval observers appear to have perceived the changes in *reverse* of normal theories of social dynamics recognized by scholars like Paul Langford. A meritocracy declining with the resurgence of aristocratic privilege confirmed change, but in the nature of Clark’s concept of an essentially old order, absorbing conflict and tension within a society dominated by the elite. Those who embraced naval tradition embraced the old methods of officer recruitment from the rank and file and promotion based on performance. Royal Navy traditionalists therefore championed a socially and politically “radical” institution, subversive of the old-order hierarchies. The freedom of an independent meritocracy, exemplified by the navy under Lord Sandwich throughout the 1770s and early 80s, faded with the century as the dominant forces in English society – the political and social elite – asserted their control and brought the service into line with more traditional values. External factors, including politics and wealth, became the agents of change in renegotiating the social equation within both the officer corps and between officers and the men. The result was a resurgence of patrician hegemony that restored an old-order system of junior-officer selection and promotion within the service.

⁵⁸ Clark, *Society*, p. 11.

External Sources of Authority

Religion

As one of the two pillars in Clark's theory of an ascendant elite in Georgian society, religion supported the old social order with the justification of divine right. The inseparability of religion from the laws of the land meant that Anglican values remained dominant in English social structures despite the growing prominence of secular issues in daily life and the challenges presented by Protestant Dissenters. The public structures and ideological rationales of Clark's confessional state "signifie[d] monopoly not unanimity . . . [as] power was formally confined to Anglicans. . . ." ⁵⁹ Throughout the Great Wars the "Protestant Constitution" remained firmly in place. In 1792 Samuel Heywood, a Unitarian Dissenter and unabashed Whig, railed at the omnipotence of the Anglican Church and its officers:

Every event in life contributes to their interests; they christen; they educate; they marry; they church; they bury; they persuade; they frighten; they govern; and scarce any thing is done without them. Notwithstanding all this, they roar aloud that they cannot keep their ground. ⁶⁰

The social structure supported by Anglicanism drew strength from a resurgence of evangelicalism in the last decades of the eighteenth century. As a reaction against the atheistic radicalism of the French Revolution and the increasingly Catholic character of Irish rebellion, conservative evangelicals assimilated the authoritarian tenets of Anglican doctrine in their support for old-order hierarchies. Touting "national virtues" such as "obedience, submission, orderliness, respect for authority, patience in suffering, civility,

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 30, 31, 33, 40.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

restraint and loyalty,”⁶¹ the case in support of Anglican ideology, with all its political and social implications, gained momentum. Wesleyan Methodism, with its foundations in High Tory politics, exemplified such values and spread rapidly while its more democratically-oriented offshoots, such as Alexander Kilham’s “New Connexion” founded in 1797 (also known as Tom Paine Methodism), saw little success in the face of a government poised for swift action against any rumblings of liberal reform. As E. P. Thompson suggests “it was in the counter-revolutionary years after 1795 that Methodism made most headway amongst working people and acted most evidently as a stabilising or regressive social force.”⁶²

The combined forces of religion and law, which supported a traditional social hierarchy dominated by the hereditary elite, became increasingly evident in the Royal Navy of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The “rigging” of church every Sunday aboard Georgian men-of-war (when the requirements of the service allowed it) brought this message home to mariners in sermons preached either by a commissioned parson, a passenger cleric, or in many instances, the captain himself. At least once a month a reading of the “Articles of War” followed church service. In such a setting Admiralty law took on a quasi-religious quality, drilling the message of submission to authority by right of laws, both natural and revealed, via the trappings and rhetorical style of a religious sermon. In 1806 young Robert Wilson recalled, “. . . on board H. M. ships, the Articles of War are ordained to be read the first Sunday in every month, which the seamen term saying prayers.”⁶³ In ships without chaplains or captains well motivated to

⁶¹ David Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland: from the Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 13.

⁶² E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 46.

⁶³ Wilson, “Journal,” p. 151.

religious instruction, a reading of the “Articles of War” might replace divine service altogether. In the Royal Navy, the law and the church were effectively one. Clark sees the unity of church and law as a ubiquitous feature of English society in the long eighteenth century and one of the primary agents in the maintenance of an *ancien régime*.

Beyond forming the social cement that bound legal and religious doctrine, the spiritual role of church service aboard men-of-war remained limited. The first Article of War demanded:

All commanders, captains, and officers, in or belonging to any of His Majesty's ships or vessels of war, shall cause the public worship of Almighty God, according to the liturgy of the Church of England established by law, to be solemnly, orderly and reverently performed in their respective ships; and shall take care that prayers and preaching, by the chaplains in holy orders of the respective ships, be performed diligently; and that the Lord's day be observed according to law.⁶⁴

The frequency of religious services, however, remained at the discretion of individual captains and at the mercy of wind, weather, and the demands of the service. The Reverend Edward Mangin bore no illusions as to the priority granted to ministering aboard a ship:

Of my comrades, most of them were either too much engaged with the business of the ship, or too confined and technical in the turn of their minds. . . . to go among the crew, and discourse with them of religion and morality, I have already shown not to be very practicable. . . . I accordingly felt myself most awkwardly situated and fancied I was somewhat like a pet bear on board. I was fed, coaxed and stared at: if in my den, forgotten; if at large, in everybody's way; of no manner of use – and at best endured!⁶⁵

Mangin was far from delighted with shipboard life, although it appeared that his melancholy did not stem from any ill-treatment directed at him by the ship's company. Upon leaving the vessel Mangin wrote of his shipmates, “I can not omit observing that

⁶⁴ www.io.com/gibbonsb/articles.html, “The Articles of War,” 1749, accessed 1/12/06.

⁶⁵ Rev. Edward Mangin, “Edward Mangin's Journal,” in Thursfield, *Naval Journals*, p. 22.

they united in treating me and my office with respect: and in behaviour at Divine Worship, would have set a worthy example to the most decorous congregation on shore. . . .” The point however, remained: “. . . [to] convert a man-of-war’s crew into Christians would be a task to which the courage of Loyola, the philanthropy of Howard and the eloquence of St. Paul united, would prove inadequate.”⁶⁶

Despite such commentary and Brian Lavery’s conclusion that “religion played very little part in the life of the seaman,”⁶⁷ the subtext of religious order underscored, at least for those of the lower deck, the need for rigorous observance of subordination. To a large extent, religious instruction aboard ship was more a matter of didactic style over religious substance. Whether “church” rigged on Sundays involved a sermon on creation or a litany on the Articles of War the message, effectively, remained the same. Holy law prescribed an unquestioned faith in the judgment of shipboard superiors – even if those superiors were boys, largely ignorant of seamanship and the professional requirements of command.

By the start of the Napoleonic Wars, birth and interest had privileged many aristocratic and gentlemanly boys to the quarterdeck. Leadership afloat, like leadership ashore, received a vital boost from a religious dogma that preached obedience and respect for authority both natural and ascribed, regardless of its age or professional credentials.

Politics

Midshipmen and quarterdeck boys, as embryonic gentlemen officers, drew authority from the political forms of English society which supported governance based on the hereditary right of society’s natural leaders. Even John Locke’s *Two Treatises of*

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 25, 14.

⁶⁷ Lavery, *Nelson’s Navy*, p. 209.

Government did not deny the hierarchical nature of society, the patriarchal role of government, or the influence of old-order entitlements to authority. “*That all Men by Nature are equal*, I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of *Equality* . . . *Birth* may subject some, and *Alliance* or *Benefits* others, to pay an Observance to those whom Nature, Gratitude or other Respects may have made it due. . . .”⁶⁸ Such old-order sentiments prevailed in 1793 as Tory Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, after nearly ten years at Downing Street, shed the remnants of his liberal-reformist cloak and assumed the mantle of an arch conservative. The hammer of English Jacobinism, Pitt suspended *habeas corpus* in 1794, and in 1796 instituted a series of “gagging bills” which “represented a significant ratcheting-up of his repressive responses to discontent.”⁶⁹ As a war-time prime minister, Pitt was acutely aware of the importance of the armed services, despite his self-professed shortcomings as a military man. Disappointments with England’s Continental army did not, however, dampen his enthusiasm for the navy as the dominant force in Britain’s war machine.

The strength of Pitt’s belief in the Royal Navy and concern for her welfare resulted in the removal of his elder brother, the 2nd Earl of Chatham, from the position of First Lord of the Admiralty in 1794. Pitt understood only too well that Chatham “lacked the drive and intellectual grasp to run the navy at the height of a global war.”⁷⁰ The appointment of the moderate “Portland” Whig, Earl Spencer, as First Lord represented a more sound investment in the operational effectiveness of the Royal Navy and a new focus on the naval strategy. Spencer, however, seized the opportunity to

⁶⁸ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, II, s. 54 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 304. Locke’s italics.

⁶⁹ William Hague, *William Pitt the Younger* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 2005), p. 319.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 307-08.

indulge prejudices that favored the political elite in the appointment of young gentlemen and officers, exploiting his powers of patronage for both parliamentary and personal gain. Accordingly, privileged boys benefited from Spencer's methods. As a protégé and close relation of the Lady Spencer, young Edward Fellowes "rose from midshipman to captain in twenty months,"⁷¹ a feat of unprecedented advancement, even amongst the navy's most brilliant young officers. In response to the "importunities and remonstrances of Lord Carnarvon, who made such an outcry about his son's disappointments," Spencer saw to it that Midshipman Lord Charles Herbert made lieutenant at eighteen and post captain at twenty.⁷² Yet, the First Lord was not oblivious to the needs of the service as a whole. Sensible of the legitimacy of grievances aired by the Spithead mutineers, Spencer was instrumental in convincing Pitt to yield to their demands.⁷³ The Nore uprising, however, with its subversive political agenda, elicited a far less conciliatory response from either the First Lord or the Prime Minister. As William Hague notes, Pitt, "the champion of enlightened reform had now become the chief agent of repression."⁷⁴

Ironically, the repression of political dissent within the Royal Navy was applied with greater gusto by the Addington administration's choice of First Lord. Despite his Foxite Whig allegiances, the Earl St. Vincent escalated attacks on corruption in the dockyards, venality among Navy Board members, and Jacobinism within the service to the level of witch-hunts. The public face of St. Vincent's policies also appeared to turn the tables on traditional aristocratic influence by insisting that places for all existing officers must be found before other promotions would take place. Such democratic

⁷¹ Rodger, *Command*, p. 515.

⁷² Earl Spencer to William Windham, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 516.

⁷³ Hague, *Pitt*, p. 339.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

principles also extended to the appointment and promotion of young gentlemen. The *Times* commented on St. Vincent's plan, noting that "the system is undoubtedly just and highly honourable to him, but if the noble Lord can pursue such a rigorous and impartial line of conduct for a continuance, it will be more than his predecessors have been able to accomplish."⁷⁵ In practice, such noble ideals were beyond St. Vincent too. His actions over the following years demonstrated much partisan handling of appointments across the spectrum of naval command, from midshipmen to post captains. St. Vincent bragged on the impartiality he demonstrated towards his own nephew who, despite "uncommon merit," he "refused to promote [even] at the request of four princes of the blood." The First Lord did, in fact, promote the boy, ensuring him a post captaincy at age nineteen.⁷⁶

Lord Thomas Cochrane, on the other hand, was a dyed-in-the-wool Tory and high on St. Vincent's black list. Even Cochrane's celebrated action against a Spanish xebec frigate, far superior in guns and men to his own four-pounder brig, could not gain his step to post captain. Cochrane quoted an early biographer of St. Vincent in his own memoirs: "Lord St Vincent *was so much pressed* on the subject of Lord Cochrane's promotion for taking the *Gamo*, that it became almost a point of etiquette with the earl *not to make him a captain*." Cochrane was certainly not short on powerful interest, though in this case, it did little good. "An illustrious person is reported to have said, 'My Lord, we must make Lord Cochrane "post";' to which Lord St Vincent replied, 'The First Lord of the Admiralty knows no *must*'."⁷⁷ Even when St. Vincent's moral barometer operated well, such political biases exemplified the fact that Admiralty favor functioned almost exclusively within the highest ranks of society. Patronage, interest, and political favor

⁷⁵ Tucker, *St. Vincent*, Vol. I, p. 313.

⁷⁶ St. Vincent, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 517.

⁷⁷ Cochrane, *Autobiography*, p. 76. Cochrane's italics.

determined opportunities for a naval career, leaving the sons of the unconnected to rely on little more than luck in their struggle for recognition and promotion.

Prime Minister Addington's search for political legitimacy, via the appointment of a celebrated naval hero like St. Vincent as First Lord, backfired disastrously, leaving the Royal Navy decimated by 1803. St. Vincent "had wrecked morale and efficiency, reduced the [dock]yard's workforce by a fifth and badly damaged their capacity to recruit." The results were visible in the miserable state of the fleet by the recommencement of war in 1803. In 1797, 108 ships of the line and 293 frigates and smaller vessels were in active service, 82 percent of the total fleet. By 1805 the proportion of operational vessels had fallen to 40 percent with only 83 ships of the line in commission and "an acute shortage of frigates and men to man them."⁷⁸ The downsizing translated into even narrower opportunities for quarterdeck boys and an even greater concentration of Honorable young gentlemen within the fleet.⁷⁹

The return of Pitt as Prime Minister in 1804, coupled with the appointment of Henry Dundas, now Lord Melville, as First Lord ushered in a new era of rapid mobilization and naval expansion. Melville's impeachment for corruption less than a year later did little to halt the growth of the Royal Navy. The efforts of his successor, Charles Middleton, Lord Barham, along with years of successful battles and prize captures, helped to build the navy's largest fleet ever by 1810, with a total of 152 ships of the line and 183 cruisers.⁸⁰ The expanded fleet did not, however, open opportunities for the multitudes of deserving young gentlemen. Decades of largely unregulated entry had produced a glut of quarterdeck boys while the continued popularity of a naval career for

⁷⁸ Rodger, *Command*, pp. 477, 482.

⁷⁹ See Appendix A.

⁸⁰ Glete, *Navies*, Vol. II, p. 554

the sons of the social and political elite only heightened competition for limited positions. The old system of interest and patronage continued and, indeed, intensified. After Pitt's death, a series of short-lived governments, all Tory except for Grenville's facetiously named "Ministry of the Talents," sought to maintain the old social structures of the nation and the navy alike, pursuing policies that generally conformed to Pitt's maxim of improvement instead of innovation – "redesign rather than revolution."⁸¹

Lord Collingwood, a representative of the old guard, believed in the effectiveness of old-order paternalism as a means of maintaining naval discipline. As naval equivalents of the ruling class, he believed that officers were responsible for shielding mariners from disruptive influences, particularly those stirred by political radicals. The mutinies of 1797, which hinted at the political potential of more than one hundred thousand⁸² lower-deck men, emphasized the need for more ardent paternalistic control. Many saw the devastating potential of a rebellious political solidarity among the sailors of England. Commentators, both Tory and Whig, sought to explain the 1797 uprisings as the work of Dissenting religious sects; corresponding societies; and/or political subversives such as Foxite Whigs, Jacobins, and Irish rebels. Despite the lack of evidence connecting any of these groups to the mutinies,⁸³ the government, naval authorities, newspapers, and conservative magazines laid blame on the nearest manifestations of political, social, or religious heterodoxy. The ugly truth, which many refused to accept, was that honest tars, the simple salts of the Royal Navy, had conceived of mutiny on their own without ingesting any of the radical poisons of the day.

⁸¹ Hague, *Pitt*, p. 494.

⁸² The Royal Navy reached its maximum size in terms of men, "just over 140,000 between 1808 and 1810," Rodger, *Command*, p. 499.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

While this in itself suggested some form of communal change in the character of British sailors, Clark's model couches an explanation for this change in terms of the breakdown of paternalistic duty. Admiralty neglect for the welfare of its seamen constituted a forfeiture of the utilitarian contract between those who commanded and those who obeyed. The Royal Navy of the 1790s had, as a paternal institution, failed to fulfill its basic promise to be useful to those under its authority – to feed, clothe, pay, and administer health care to its mariners. Yet, the protests that erupted into the Spithead and Yarmouth mutinies quietly dissolved as sailors' demands were met. From the lower-deck point of view, Admiralty concessions restored the utility of the relationship and resurrected a functional paternalistic system. The imbalance within the naval relationship was corrected, but within the framework of the old order.

According to Lieutenant William Hotham, the conduct of the mutineers exhibited a "marked civility and deference." Of the delegates he insisted, "[they] are not to be understood as ringleaders of a mutinous assembly, but as men appointed by the majority of each ship's company, in order to prevent confusion and obtain as speedy a regularity of affairs as possible."⁸⁴ In this way, Hotham spoke to the apologetic quality of the Yarmouth mutiny despite the legitimacy of its grievances. The Great Mutinies did little to further causes such as "the rights of man," the ascendancy of the individual, or freedom of thought or action within the service. The Royal Navy remained an hierarchical oligarchy based on unquestioned obedience to superiors, backed up by repressive political policies that meted out capital punishment as a solution to the slightest forms of ideological dissent. In short, it mirrored precisely the characteristics of Pitt's political state.

⁸⁴ Lt. William Hotham, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 449.

While improvements occurred in the conditions under which the men lived and worked, and approaches to discipline softened in the years after the mutinies, the basic structure of shipboard society remained intact, sustained equally from below as from above. In Clark's model, these changes and fluctuations occurred within the framework of the "dynastic idiom."⁸⁵ Challenges to the older order appeared frequently in late-eighteenth century England, yet social and governmental leadership remained in the hands of the elite by way of a combination of factors including:

appreciation for the advantages derived from [aristocratic government] . . . coercion . . . habits and customs . . . [which] men appeared to obey not for the true reason that they helped maintain social order, but for reasons which often seemed entirely fanciful, or for no reason at all.⁸⁶

Such characteristics are equally applicable to the structure of authority in the Royal Navy. The power granted to young gentlemen originated from the same sources that determined political and social hierarchies, both of which equally reflected the continued dominance of the patrician classes. The Royal Navy of the Napoleonic Wars, like the society it protected, remained a patriarchal, "confessional state dominated by providential status . . . [and] structured vertically rather than horizontally . . . [It was] a society fixated on the social theory of its elite. . . ."⁸⁷

Education

Education, or the lack of it, presented one of the most immovable barriers between quarterdeck and lower deck throughout the long eighteenth century. Despite the institution of philanthropic schools for the poor throughout major urban centers by the 1780s, the practical availability of schooling for the masses lay many decades in the

⁸⁵ Clarke, *Society*, pp. 146, 150-51, 154-55, 125.

⁸⁶ Burrow, quoted in Clark, *Society*, p. 162-63.

⁸⁷ Clark, *Society*, p. 125.

future. Public schools like Westminster, Eton, Harrow, and Rugby catered to the wealthy upper-classes and generally provided boys with classical humanist educations designed to prepare them for life as a gentleman. Even for those able to afford public schools, practical naval skills such as mathematics and navigation often required specialist instruction. The poor reputation of the Royal Naval Academy/College during the Great Wars suggested similar shortcomings in the practical instruction of future officers. The making of a “man of science,” as Peter Cullen suggested all potential commanders must be, separated even very young officers from the men of the lower deck:

Mathematics, Astronomy, Navigation, Gunnery, etc. are sciences which the officer must know or he cannot be an officer, the common seaman needs not – and learns not. This is the grand basis of Naval Discipline, and navies cannot exist without it. To the landsman this appears slavery, but it is not; it is ignorance submitting to knowledge, and is true wisdom and discretion.

According to Cullen, education provided the first foundations of old-order paternalism:

“. . . a seaman looks up to his officer, as a son to his father, whom he knows to be more wise, more experienced, and more skilful than he can possibly be, because he is scientifically taught.”⁸⁸ When applied to the relationship between a twenty-year lower-deck veteran and a fourteen year-old midshipmen, Cullen’s opinion appeared distinctly colored by his faith in the old social system. Written in 1800, Cullen’s journal mirrored widely-held beliefs on the educational state of naval command and the importance of maintaining a safe level of ignorance among its seamen.

For the average tar, the possibility of attaining even a rudimentary education remained slim. Although literacy in England rose substantially in the second half of the eighteenth century, the lot of the common sailor, separated from the land for years on end, set him apart from wider social developments. Often raised at sea, Georgian

⁸⁸ Cullen, “Journal,” p. 105.

mariners seldom gained access to the quantity or quality of education they might be exposed to ashore. Thursfield notes the exceptions to this rule in his introduction to “Letters from the Lower Deck.” The quality of both the prose and the hand in the samples published are “noteworthy as illustrating the high standard of literacy of men serving on the lower deck at the end of the 18th century. . . .” Yet, Thursfield also warns, “. . . it would perhaps be unwise to conclude that the standard indicated . . . was general; for these particular letters have no doubt survived because they were so well written.”⁸⁹ Assistance from educated press men, volunteers, bounty, and quota men oftentimes presented the best educational opportunities for life-long mariners.

Such institutionalized illiteracy reflected old attitudes towards educating the poor, which some suggested “would be prejudicial to their morals and happiness; it would teach them to despise their lot in life . . . [and] render them fractious and refractory.”⁹⁰ The gulf sustained by such beliefs only reinforced the authority of any officer, petty or otherwise, who could read and add well enough calculate a ship’s position. Other social commentators supported the education of the lower orders not to close the gap but to keep them firmly in their place: “It is through education that the poor become acquainted with the duties they owe to society.”⁹¹ Even Paul Langford notes, “. . . there was a very deep need, perhaps reinforced by the very instability of commercial society, to stress the divine requirement and political desirability of social subordination.”⁹² Such a sentiment was fully realized in the naval social order and facilitated through selective education.

⁸⁹ Thursfield, *Naval Journals*, p. 351.

⁹⁰ Davies Giddy, *Royal Society*, 1807, quoted in Porter, *Society*, p. 165.

⁹¹ John Evans, quoted in Porter, *Society*, p. 165.

⁹² Langford, *Polite*, p. 654.

The counter to such arguments was no less vocal and came from an equally distinguished camp. Captain Sir Alexander Ball argued that “. . . the education of the lower classes was of the utmost consequence to the permanent security of the empire, even for the sake of our navy.”⁹³ Admiral Patton agreed that the future of the navy lay in the hands of its seamen, though he stopped short of prescribing a system for educating the men above and beyond their station.

Others saw the argument as moot. Roy Porter notes that education, whether for the high orders or the low, only “tended to reinforce existing social, cultural and gender distinctions rather than break them down and make new ones.”⁹⁴ For the Royal Navy, the educational gulf dividing quarterdeck and lower deck provided strong evidence for this type of reinforcement of traditional social hierarchies. The ability of young gentlemen to read and write, navigate, and formulate tactics reflected a widening social gap within the Royal Navy, one which used education to legitimize authority and promote a more socially homogeneous midshipman’s berth.

⁹³ Sir Alexander Ball, quoted in Rodger, *Command*, p. 491.

⁹⁴ Porter, *Society*, p. 167.

CONCLUSION

Samuel Leech was a lad of thirteen when Captain Lord William Fitzroy accepted him as a lower-deck boy aboard HMS *Macedonian*. It was a painful experience that Leech recorded two decades years later in a narrative colored by the evangelical reformist language of the late 1830s. Leech recalled the sadistic proclivities of his captain which also reflected in the bullying of the petty officers:

I felt the insults and tyranny of the midshipmen. These little minions of power ordered and drove me round like a dog, nor did I or the other boys dare interpose a word. They were officers; their word was our law, and woe betide the rebellious boy that dared refuse implicit obedience.⁹⁵

Even in 1810, at a time when social reform in terms of more humane treatment for seamen was well established, it appeared that some old habits of command died hard. This was particularly evident when the subject of a young gentleman's cruelty was a mere boy of lowly rank with no connections to protect him. The hostility exhibited by young gentlemen towards boys of the lower deck might have reflected some frustration over limitations placed on a young gentleman's authority. It may also have reflected growing frustration with the state of advancement and promotion in the Royal Navy of the late-Napoleonic Wars.

A glut of officers in the service after 1793 raised the problem of unemployment and professional immobility. As early as 1797, the Earl Spencer recognized "a crisis in the naval career structure" as the number of officers grew faster than the number of ships able to accommodate them.⁹⁶ The restrictions limiting the number of young gentlemen introduced into the service by individual captains had only ever been loosely enforced.

⁹⁵ Leech, *Thirty Years*, p. 21.

⁹⁶ Rodger, *Command*, 518.

The Navy Board's control of the examination for lieutenant, which operated independently of the Admiralty, placed no limitations on the number of quarterdeck boys it passed. The combined result was a bottleneck of promotion in the early years of the new century. As no system of decoration existed to reward the conduct of exceptional junior officers, promotion remained the only means of acknowledging merit. In 1804 the Admiralty introduced the term "sub-lieutenant" as a sop to the multitudes of passed midshipmen who could not obtain a lieutenant's commission due to the lack of openings aboard His Majesty's ships. These young men often served ignominious duty aboard lesser commands with gunboats and inshore patrols. As Rodger notes, ". . . unfortunately [sub-lieutenant] was not a rank and conferred no useful status; rather the reverse, since gunbrig lieutenants had a bad reputation."⁹⁷

Animosity towards young Honorables and boys with significant political and social interest escalated as competition for promotion and placement grew fierce. Lord St. Vincent's protest to George III that "at present the Navy is so overrun by the younger branches of the nobility, and the sons of Members of Parliament, and they swallow up all the patronage . . . ,"⁹⁸ indicated awareness of the problem at the highest levels of English society.

In the case of Lord Fitzroy's appointment to *Macedonian* in the summer of 1810, the point was illustrated only too well. Just a few months earlier, Captain John Clavell, an officer with a distinguished career and a protégé of Collingwood's since Trafalgar, had begged his Admiral for assistance in finding a ship. To Clavell's pleas for relief from half-pay, Collingwood responded:

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 521.

⁹⁸ Tucker, *St. Vincent*, Vol. II, p. 267.

I am very sorry that you have so little prospect of getting employed at sea; because I am sure that there is no officer who takes the service more to heart, or would do it more justice than you would. I have so little influence at the Admiralty, that I have no reason to suppose anything which I could say would avail you. Lord Mulgrave [First Lord in 1809] knows my opinion of you, and the confidence I have in you; but the truth is, that he is so pressed by persons having parliamentary influence, that he cannot find himself at liberty to select those whose nautical skill and gallantry would otherwise present them as proper men for the service. A hole or two in the skin will not weigh against a vote in Parliament, and my influence is very light at present.⁹⁹

So much for the prospects of the unconnected – and for the future of the Royal Navy.

Brilliance, daring, and valor had delivered Britain her sovereignty of the seas, yet the system of advancement based on merit faced serious threats from the forces of social and political rank. The advantage wielded by the American Navy during the War of 1812, stemmed from undeniable technical innovations and the vastly superior firepower of her “super frigates.” Yet the Royal Navy’s defeat in the conflict was absolute and must, at least in some part, be seen as a function of her failings at the command level.

It is significant however, that the service was able to rebound from its defeat in America to regain its status as the most powerful and successful navy in the world for the next century. The diplomatic weeding of unsuitable officers via promotion to land-based positions, whereby disgrace could be softened with a step up in both rank and pay, provided the most elegant solution for both the Admiralty and its well-born wash outs. Fitzroy’s situation exemplified the process which, despite his disgrace, allowed the wheels of promotion to carry him inexorably towards the pinnacle of the naval profession. Yet in matters of officer entry, opportunities grew increasingly narrow.

⁹⁹ Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood to Captain J. Clavell, October 20, 1809, in G. L. Newnham Collingwood, *A Selection from the Public and Private Correspondence of Vice-Admiral Lord Collingwood: Interspersed with Memoirs of his Life*, First American Edition (New York: G. and C. and H. Carvill, 1829), p. 405.

Admiralty control over the appointment of young gentlemen as future officers escalated in the post-war years, peaking in 1830, when the Lords Commissioners assumed temporary but complete control over the nomination of officer volunteers. Michael Lewis' data reveals that "of the 154 officers who entered the Navy after the war and had reached post-captain by 1849, only twenty-three were not the sons or grandsons of naval officers, peers, members of Parliament, baronets, landed gentlemen, army officers, bishops, deans or royalty."¹⁰⁰ By 1858-59, 57 percent of the volunteers nominated as potential officers did so with the backing of "peers, members of Parliament, baronets or knights of [Prime Minister Derby's] party. . . ." Political interest backed by wealth became the essential prerequisite for a naval career such that "even the most distinguished naval families sometimes had great difficulty in obtaining nominations without political influence."¹⁰¹ The trend that surfaced during the French Revolutionary Wars, one that led away from the naval meritocracy of mid-century towards a service dominated by social rank, economic status, education, and political connections, became institutionalized in the years after 1815. The qualities of an *ancien régime* that inspired Jeremy Bentham to denounce ". . . cold, selfish, priest-ridden, lawyer-ridden, lord-ridden, squire-ridden, soldier-ridden England,"¹⁰² were also reflected in the increasingly centralized old-order organization of Royal Naval command.

As the separation between quarterdeck boys and the men of the lower deck widened so too the equations of authority changed. The essential element of Jonathan Clark's thesis that renders it so applicable to the Royal Navy of the Great Wars is its acceptance of change and fluctuation within a traditional social framework. The mutinies

¹⁰⁰ Michael Lewis, quoted in Rodger, "Officers," pp. 143-44.

¹⁰¹ Rodger, "Officers," p. 146.

¹⁰² Jeremy Bentham, quoted in Clark, *Society*, p. 162.

of 1797 changed the way officers looked at the men who served under them and eventually forced a reconsideration of disciplinary measures. This in turn, altered the terms of the relationship between quarterdeck and lower deck, forcing the two even further apart by means of social polarization.

The concept of patrician hegemony accurately characterizes the Royal Navy of the Great Wars and beyond. Its presence is visible at the level of command most revealing of change – that of officer entry. In terms of both the selection of quarterdeck boys and the evolutions that took place in the nature of the authority granted them, we find the embodiment of a social *ancien régime*. The navy encapsulated Clark’s vision of English society at large throughout the period of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. “The state form . . . associated with commercial and financial strength, fiscal efficiency, and naval success, was not the ‘modern state’ in our sense: it was the state form identified by William Cobbett in the 1820s as ‘Old Corruption’.”¹⁰³

In the Royal Navy of the nineteenth century the quarterdeck boy reflected changing conceptions of quarterdeck privilege. The new face of command was well-born, well-educated, and well-connected, and might, with any luck, also exhibit a spark of talent. The Royal Navy of the Great Wars institutionalized the maxim of command that came to dominate popular conceptions of the age – a paradigm that demanded its boys be both officers *and* gentleman.

¹⁰³ Clark, *Society*, p. 42.

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PRO ADM37/4194. HMS *York*
PRO ADM37/4198. HMS *Aeolus*
PRO ADM37/4217. HMS *Amphion*
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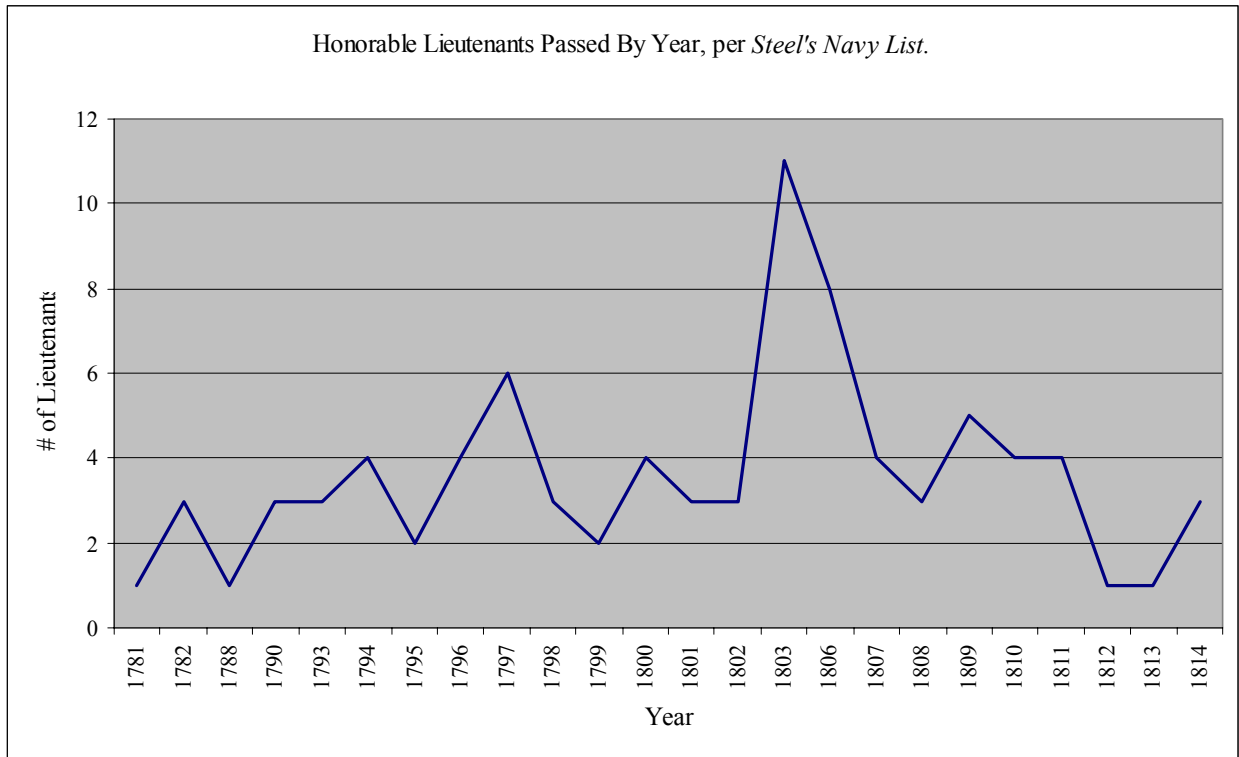
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APPENDIX A: HONORABLE LIEUTENANTS PASSED BY YEAR,
PER *STEEL'S NAVY LIST*



Source: TNA: PRO Ref. Bks. 359.3 ADB, *Steel's Navy List*, Dec. 1795, 1797, 1799, 1801, 1803, 1804, 1806, 1807, Nov. 1801, Aug. 1812, Nov. 1814.

APPENDIX B: HONORABLE QUARTERDECK BOYS OF THE
BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR, 1805

Ship/Guns/Command	No. Quarterdeck Boys by Rating	No. "Honorable" Boys (son of baronet or higher)	Total Q'Deck Boys
<i>Victory</i> (104) - Nelson/Hardy	Mids=22, V1=9	2	31
<i>Royal Sovereign</i> (100) - Coll./Rotherham	Mids=21, V1=7	0	28
<i>Britannia</i> (100) - Northesk/Bullen	Mids=26, V1=4	0	30
<i>Temeraire</i> (98) – Harvey	Mids=18, V1=8	0	26
<i>Neptune</i> (98) – Fremantle	Mids=16, V1=6	1	22
<i>Dreadnought</i> (98) – Conn	Mids=15, V1=1	0	16
<i>Prince</i> (98) – Grindall	Mids=25, V1=2	0	27
<i>Tonnant</i> (80) – Tyler	Mids=12	0	12
<i>Belleisle</i> (74) – Hargood	Mids=15, V1=6	0	21
<i>Revenge</i> (74) – Moorsom	Mids=16, V1=2	0	18
<i>Spartiate</i> (74) – Laforey	Mids=17	1	17
<i>Mars</i> (74) – Duff	Mids=17, V1=9	2	26
<i>Defiance</i> (74) – Durham	Mids=18, V1=4	1	22
<i>Minotaur</i> (74) – Mansfield	Mids=13, V1=2	0	15
<i>Conquerer</i> (74) - I. Pellew	Mids=16, V1=9	0	25
<i>Achilles</i> (74) – King	Mids=14, V1=3	0	17
<i>Colossus</i> (74) – Morris	Mids=14, V1=2	0	16
<i>Defence</i> (74) – Hope	Mids=14, V1=1	1	15
<i>Leviathan</i> (74) – Bayntun	Mids=11, V1=5	0	16
<i>Bellerophon</i> (74) – Cooke	Mids=16, V1=6	1	22
<i>Orion</i> (74) – Codrington	Mid=13, V1=7	2	20
<i>Swiftsure</i> (74) - Rutherford	Mids=16, V1=5	1	21
<i>Ajax</i> (74) – Pilford	Mids=17, V1=7	1	24
<i>Thunderer</i> (74) Stockham	Mids=9, V1=4	0	13
<i>Polyphemus</i> (64) – Redmill	Mids=10	0	10
<i>Africa</i> (64) – Digby	Mids=11, V1=6	0	17
<i>Agamemnon</i> (64) – Berry	Mids=12, V1=3	0	15
<i>Euryalus</i> (36) – Blackwood	Mids=10	1	10
<i>Phoebe</i> (36) – Capel	Mids=10, V1=4	1	14
<i>Naiad</i> (36) – Dundas	Mids=6, V1=3	0	9
<i>Sirius</i> (36) – Prowse	Mids=6, V1=3	1	9
<i>Pickle</i> (Schooner) – Lapenotiere	?=1	0	1
<i>Entreprenante</i> (Cutter) – Young	?=2	0	2
Total Ships = 33		16	587

Percentage of "Honorable" Boys in Trafalgar Fleet: 2.73%

Key: Mids = Midshipmen, V1 = Volunteers First Class

Source: Robert Mackenzie, *The Trafalgar Roll: The Ships and Officers*, intro. by Colin White (London: Chatham Publishing, 2004)

APPENDIX C: HONORABLE QUARTERDECK BOYS OF THE
BATTLE OF QUIBERON BAY, 1759

Ship/Guns/Command	No. Quarterdeck Boys by Rating	No. "Honorable" Boys (son of baronet or higher)	Total Q'Deck Boys
<i>Royal George</i> (100) - Hawke/Campbell	Mids=20, CS=19, AS=5	0	44
<i>Union</i> (90) - Hardy/Evans	Mids=12, CS=30, AS=10	0	52
<i>Namur</i> (90) – Buckle	Mids=24, CS=32, AS=12	1	68
<i>Duke</i> (90) – Graves	Mids=11, CS=27	0	38
<i>Mars</i> (74) – Young	Mids=16, CS=23	0	39
<i>Warspite</i> (74) – Bentley	Mids=13, CS=24	0	37
<i>Hercules</i> (74) – Fortsecue	Mids=13, CS=20	0	33
<i>Torbay</i> (74) – Keppel	Mids=14, CS=10	1	24
<i>Magnanime</i> (74) – Howe	Mids=16, CS=29	2	45
<i>Resolution</i> (74) - Speke (Nov 13, 1759)	Mids=15, CS=26	0	41
<i>Hero</i> (74) – Edgcombe	Mids=11, CS=25	0	36
<i>Swiftsure</i> (70) – Stanhope	Mids=12, CS=24	0	36
<i>Dorsetshire</i> (70) – Dennis	Mids=16, CS=18	0	34
<i>Burford</i> (70) – Gambier	Mids=12, CS=20	0	32
<i>Chichester</i> (70) – Willet	Mids=15, CS=26	0	41
<i>Temple</i> (70) – W. Shirley	Mids=10, CS=17	0	27
<i>Revenge</i> (64) – Storr	Mids=14, CS=19	0	33
<i>Essex</i> (64) - O'Brien	Mids=11, CS=22	0	33
<i>Kingston</i> (60) – T. Shirley	Mids=10, CS=15	0	25
<i>Intrepid</i> (60) – Maplesden	Mids=10, CS=17	0	27
<i>Montague</i> (60) – Rowley	Mids=9, CS=16	0	25
<i>Dunkirk</i> (60) – Digby	Mids=6, CS=13	2	19
<i>Defiance</i> (60) – Baird	Mid=11, CS=15	0	26
Joined between Ushant and Belle Isle:			
<i>Rochester</i> (50) – Duff	Mids=10, CS=14	0	24
<i>Portland</i> (50) – Arbuthnot	Mids=9, CS=16	0	25
<i>Falkland</i> (50) – Drake	Mids=8, CS=15	0	23
<i>Chatham</i> (50) – Lockhart	Mids=9, CS=11	0	20
<i>Minerva</i> (32) – A. Hood	Mid=5, CS=8	0	13
<i>Vengeance</i> (28) – Burslem	Mid=5, CS=9	0	14
<i>Coventry</i> (28) – Digges	Mids=4, CS=8	0	12
<i>Sapphire</i> (32) – Strachan	Mids=6, CS=11	0	17
<i>Venus</i> (36) – Harrison	Missed		
Total Ships = 32		6	963

**Percentage of "Honorable" Boys in
Quiberon Fleet: 0.62%**

Key: Mids = Midshipmen, CS = Captain's Servant, AS = Admiral's Servant

Source: TNA: PRO ADM36/2255-7068, Muster Rolls for the fleet at the Battle of Quiberon Bay, November 20, 1759.

APPENDIX D: LIEUTENANT'S PASSING CERTIFICATES, 1759, 1805, 1814

Years at Sea Before Passing		
1759	1805	1814
(of 196 Mids and Boys)	(of 290 Mids and Boys)	(of 291 Mids and Boys)
6 yrs 102 (52.0%)	6yrs 206 (71%)	5.5yrs 102 (35.0%)
7 yrs 39 (19.9%)	7yrs 44 (15%)	6yrs 60 (20.6%)
8yrs 28 (14.3%)	8yrs 19 (6.5%)	7yrs 38 (13%)
9yrs 16 (8.3%)	9yrs 10 (3.5%)	5yrs 25 (8.5%)
10yrs 5 (2.6%)	10yrs 10 (3.5%)	8yrs 17 (5.8%)
12yrs 2 (1.0%)	14yrs 1 (0.5%)	10yrs 15 (5.1%)
13yrs 1 (0.5%)		9yrs 11 (3.8%)
15yrs 1 (0.5%)		4.5yrs 8 (2.7%)

Age Passed for Lieutenant	Age at Entry in RN	Age at Entry in RN
1759	1805	1814
(of 192 Mids and Boys)	(of 285 Mids and Boys)	(of 284 Mids and Boys)
20yrs 32 (16.7%)	14yrs 62 (21.8%)	14yrs 73 (25.7%)
25yrs 23 (12.0%)	15yrs 42 (14.7%)	15yrs 52 (18.3%)
21yrs 22 (11.4%)	16yrs 30 (10.5%)	13yrs 49 (17.2%)
22yrs 19 (9.9%)	13yrs 27 (9.5%)	16yrs 24 (8.4%)
23yrs 18 (9.4%)	12yrs 24 (8.4%)	12yrs 16 (5.6%)
24yrs 12 (6.3%)	20yrs 24 (8.4%)	18yrs 12 (4.2%)
29yrs 12 (6.3%)	11yrs 15 (5.3%)	20yrs 12 (4.2%)
26yrs 11 (5.7%)	18yrs 14 (4.9%)	17yrs 11 (3.9%)
28yrs 11 (5.7%)	21yrs 14 (4.9%)	21yrs 9 (3.2%)

Key

V1 = Volunteer First Class
 B = Boy
 Mid = Midshipman
 AB = Able Seaman
 Ord = Ordinary Seaman
 LM = Landsman
 CapSvt = Captain's Servant
 Sup = Supernumerary
 Sch = Scholar

Entry Rank		Entry Rank	
1805		1814	
(of 288 total)		(of 290 total)	
V1	107 (37.2%)	V1	148 (51%)
AB	60 (20.8%)	Boy	42 (14.5%)
Boy	42 (14.5%)	AB	34 (11.7%)
Mid	26 (9.0%)	Mid	20 (6.9%)
LM	13 (4.5%)	Sup	16 (5.5%)
Ord	12 (4.2%)	LM	14 (4.9%)
CapSvt	10 (3.5%)	Ord	8 (2.8%)
Sch	10 (3.5%)	Clerk	5 (1.7%)
Sup	4 (1.4%)	Sch	2 (0.7%)
Note: 2 to 4.5yrs credit for sea time for Sch		Note: up to 2yrs credit for sea time for Sch	

Source: TNA: PRO ADM107/5 for 1759, PRO ADM107/32-33 for 1805, PRO ADM107/46-47 for 1814.

VITA

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