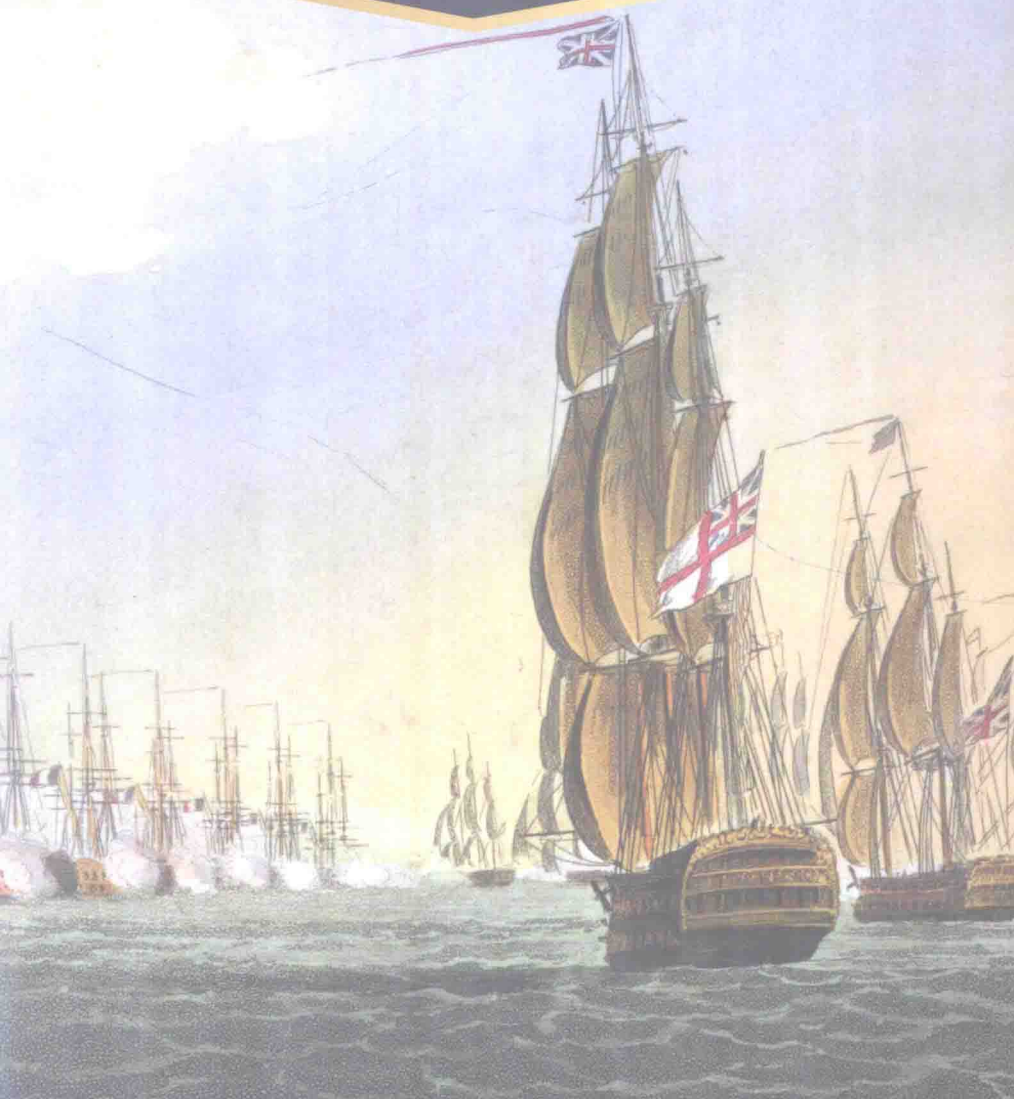


A HISTORY OF
THE ROYAL NAVY

THE NAPOLEONIC WARS

Martin Robson



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ROYAL NAVY
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Tables, Figures and Maps

Tables

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 4.1. | State of the opposing forces at the start of March 1805 | 110 |
| 6.1. | The European navies, 1805–10 | 147 |

Figures

| | | |
|------|--|-------|
| P.1. | Fruit bowl depicting a somewhat romantic view of the death of Nelson (NMRN) | xviii |
| P.2. | <i>The Death of Nelson, 21 October 1805</i> by Arthur William Devis, 1807 (NMRN) | xviii |
| P.3. | The surgeon's table aboard HMS <i>Victory</i> (NMRN) | xxi |
| I.1. | Napoleon being transferred from the <i>Bellerophon</i> to the <i>Northumberland</i> for his final voyage to St Helena (NMRN) | 2 |
| I.2. | <i>A View of the Royal Navy of Great Britain, 1804</i> (NMM) | 5 |
| 1.1. | The Glorious First of June. Plans for the fleet's 'order of sailing' in three or two lines (NMRN) | 13 |
| 1.2. | The Glorious First of June, 1794 | 15 |
| 1.3. | Lord Howe on the quarterdeck of the <i>Queen Charlotte</i> receiving a ceremonial sword from King George III (NMRN) | 17 |
| 1.4. | The 'French Cap of Liberty' taken from the French frigate <i>Unité</i> by HMS <i>Revolutionaire</i> on 12 April 1796 (NMRN) | 18 |

| | | |
|-------|--|-----|
| 1.5. | A sailor's description of a chase and capture (NMRN) | 19 |
| 1.6. | The battle of Camperdown, 11 October 1797 | 24 |
| 1.7. | John Jervis, 1st Earl of St Vincent, after Abbott (NMRN) | 28 |
| 1.8. | The battle of Copenhagen, 2 April 1801 | 31 |
| 1.9. | The battle of Copenhagen, 1801 (NMRN) | 33 |
| 1.10. | Sword broken in the hand of Captain John Stuart on board HMS <i>Medusa</i> (NMRN) | 37 |
| 2.1. | The battle of Cape St Vincent, 14 February 1797 | 50 |
| 2.2. | The battle of the Nile, 1 August 1798 | 58 |
| 2.3. | <i>Extirpation of the Plagues of Egypt</i> (NMRN) | 61 |
| 2.4. | Nelson and the 'Victors of the Nile' (NMRN) | 61 |
| 2.5. | Admiral Sir William Sidney Smith defending the ramparts of Acre (UK government art collection) | 64 |
| 2.6. | Nelson's plans (1799) to use two divisions (weather and lee) to attack an enemy fleet (NMRN) | 67 |
| 2.7. | Saumarez's action of 12 July 1801 (NMRN) | 69 |
| 2.8. | The successful amphibious assault by British forces on 8 March 1801 (NMRN) | 73 |
| 3.1. | Captain Faulkner's HMS <i>Zebra</i> assaults and captures Fort Louis, Martinique, 20 March 1794 (NMM) | 81 |
| 3.2. | Thomas Byam Martin's soup tureen, presented by a merchant of Antigua, 1797 (NMRN) | 83 |
| 3.3. | Recapture of the <i>Hermione</i> by Captain Edward Hamilton's HMS <i>Surprise</i> , 25 October 1799 (NMRN) | 84 |
| 3.4. | Sir Edward Hamilton (NMRN) | 85 |
| 3.5. | Sir Home Riggs Popham (NMRN) | 96 |
| 4.1. | <i>The Plum Pudding in Danger</i> (NMRN) | 103 |
| 4.2. | <i>Let them boast of invasion</i> (NMRN) | 106 |
| 4.3. | Nelson's pursuit of Villeneuve across the Atlantic (NMRN) | 112 |
| 4.4. | Admiral Charles Middleton, Lord Barham (NMRN) | 113 |

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 5.1. | Nelson explaining his plan of attack to his officers (NMRN) | 123 |
| 5.2. | The battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805 | 127 |
| 5.3. | Captain Charles Adair (Royal Marines Museum) | 134 |
| 5.4. | HMS <i>Victory</i> 's gundeck (NMRN) | 135 |
| 5.5. | <i>The Battle of Trafalgar</i> by Thomas Luny (NMRN) | 138 |
| 5.6. | <i>Britannia Triumphant</i> (NMRN) | 141 |
| 6.1. | Lloyd's Patriotic Fund £50 sword presented to Lieutenant John Haswell of HMS <i>Pallas</i> (NMRN) | 146 |
| 6.2. | British tars towing the Danish fleet into harbour (NMRN) | 149 |
| 6.3. | Admiral Sir James Saumarez (NMM) | 151 |
| 6.4. | Destruction of the French fleet in Basque Roads, 12 April 1809 (NMM) | 160 |
| 7.1. | Vice Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood (NMRN) | 165 |
| 7.2. | <i>A large First Rate, said to be HMS 'Victory', lying off the mouth of the Tagus</i> (T. Buttersworth) | 176 |
| 7.3. | Naval General Service Medals awarded in 1847 to men who participated in Hoste's action at Lissa, 13 March 1811 (NMRN) | 182 |
| 8.1. | <i>The Continental Dockyard</i> (NMRN) | 184 |
| 8.2. | Lieutenant William Coombe's presentation sword for a boat action on 21 January 1807 (NMRN) | 191 |
| 8.3. | 1847 Naval General Service Medal for the <i>Galatea</i> 's boat action with the <i>Lynx</i> (NMRN) | 192 |
| 8.4. | Île de France. View from the deck of the <i>Upton Castle</i> (NMM) | 195 |
| 8.5. | Banda Neira Silver Vase, 1812 (NMRN) | 198 |
| 9.1. | HMS <i>Shannon</i> taking the USS <i>Chesapeake</i> in just 11 minutes, 1 June 1813 (NMM) | 208 |
| 9.2. | The shallow draft of the 102-gun first rate HMS <i>St Lawrence</i> (NMM) | 217 |
| 9.3. | Rear Admiral George Cockburn (NMM) | 222 |

- | | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 9.4. | Sword presented to Captain John Richard Lumley of the 38-gun frigate <i>Pomone</i> (NMRN) | 224 |
| E.1. | Presentation sword of Sir Edward Pellew, Lord Exmouth, for his action against the Dey of Algiers, 27 August 1816 (NMRN) | 229 |
| C.1. | 'Nappy in tow' by Cruickshank, 24 August 1803 (NMRN) | 233 |

Maps

- | | | |
|----|-------------------|-------|
| 1. | The Atlantic | xxii |
| 2. | The Caribbean | xxiii |
| 3. | Europe | xxiv |
| 4. | The Mediterranean | xxv |
| 5. | The Far East | xxvi |

Colour Plates

1. Model of HMS *Kent* (NMRN)
2. Boat action involving Nelson off Cadiz in 1797 (NMRN)
3. *The Destruction of 'L'Orient' at the Battle of the Nile, 1 August 1798* by George Arnald (NMM)
4. *The Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805* by Nicholas Pocock (NMRN)
5. *The Battle of Trafalgar, 2.30pm* by W.L. Wyllie (NMRN)
6. HMS *Victory*, sailors' messing facilities and hammocks slung between guns (NMRN)
7. HMS *Victory*'s dining cabin (NMRN)
8. HMS *Victory* pictured in 2011 (NMRN)

Series Foreword

The Royal Navy has for centuries played a vital if sometimes misunderstood or even at times unsung part in Britain's history. Often it has been the principal, sometimes the only means of defending British interests around the world. In peacetime the Royal Navy carries out a multitude of tasks as part of government policy – showing the flag, or naval diplomacy as it is now often called. In wartime, as the senior service of Britain's armed forces, the Navy has taken the war to the enemy, by battle, by economic blockade or by attacking hostile territory from the sea. Adversaries have changed over the centuries. Old rivals have become today's alliance partners; the types of ship, the weapons within them and the technology – the 'how' of naval combat – have also changed. But fundamentally what the Navy does has not changed. It exists to serve Britain's government and its people, to protect them and their interests wherever they might be threatened in the world.

This series, through the numerous individual books within it, throws new light on almost every aspect of Britain's Royal Navy: its ships, its people, the technology, the wars and peacetime operations too, from the birth of the modern navy following the restoration of Charles II to the throne in the late seventeenth century to the war on terror in the early twenty-first century.

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the Seven Years' War, the American Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, World War II and the Cold War, or particular aspects of the service: the Navy and empire, the Women's Royal Naval Service, the Royal Marines, naval aviation and the submarine service. The books are standalone works in their own right, but when taken as a series present the most comprehensive and readable history of the Royal Navy.

Duncan Redford
National Museum of the Royal Navy

'The role in Britain's history of the Royal Navy is all too easily and too often overlooked; this series will go a long way to redressing the balance. Anyone with an interest in British history in general or the Royal Navy in particular will find this series an invaluable and enjoyable resource.'

Tim Benbow
Defence Studies Department,
King's College London at the
Defence Academy of the UK

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It is far too easy to become immersed in the minutiae of seapower, naval history and the Royal Navy, and Charlotte, Horatio and Lysander have provided a much loved and very welcome distraction from the brutal business of war at sea in the age of sail.

Martin Robson, Ide, Devon, 2014

PREFACE

‘The ever to be lamented death of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson’

Mention of the Royal Navy of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars inevitably leads to three subjects: the battle of Trafalgar of 21 October 1805, Nelson's death at that battle and his famous ship *HMS Victory*. The history of the Royal Navy during these years is far richer and far more important than just these three subjects, yet it is impossible for a book like this to escape fully from the shadow of the most decisive battle in the Royal Navy's history, the most important naval officer ever to serve and the tangible link to the age of the sailing man of war which can still be explored at the National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth.

By the time of his death, Nelson's career had marked him out as the greatest exponent of naval warfare of his time. He was the first real popular celebrity, even possessing the obligatory controversial private life. With typical drama, the nature of his personal suffering at the time of his greatest victory came to overshadow the wider strategic achievements of the Royal Navy on 21 October 1805. For Nelson's death was not instantaneous. He was not truncated or decapitated by roundshot, nor did he suffer an immediately fatal musket shot. Instead his was a lingering death. He did not die on his quarterdeck, but below in the gruesome, dark and cramped confines of *HMS Victory's* cockpit. This was where the surgeons went about their grisly business; wounded men lay in every inch of



Fig. P.1. Fruit bowl depicting a somewhat romantic view of the death of Nelson.



Fig. P.2. Painted in 1807, *The Death of Nelson, 21 October 1805* by Arthur William Devis was a careful, if highly inaccurate, study, lifting Nelson from the realm of mortal men into a quasi-religious icon.

deck space. It was a nauseating, hellish place and *Victory's* chaplain, Alexander Scott, one of the key eyewitnesses to the last few hours of Nelson's life, had nightmares about it for the rest of his life. In all his remaining years Scott could only bring himself to talk about it once, when he referred to the scene: 'it was like a butchers shambles!' Nelson was examined by *Victory's* surgeon, William Beatty, who recognized that the wound was mortal. Beatty was also responsible for preserving Nelson's remains, which he placed in a large cask filled with brandy. The musket ball that killed him had been fired from the tops of the *Redoubtable* and was recovered by Beatty during the autopsy. It was presented to Beatty by King William IV, who knighted him in 1831.

Nelson's death was recorded for posterity by key eyewitnesses and was immediately portrayed in quasi-religious imagery. Beatty himself wrote a detailed account entitled *An Authentic Narrative of the Death of Lord Nelson*. Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood, Nelson's second in command, began his post-battle report with the words, 'The ever to be lamented death of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson, who, in the late conflict with the enemy, fell in the hour of victory'. The battle and his death raised Nelson from the ranks of normal humanity into an immortal figure revered as a demigod. For a society which was being transformed by the wars against France, moving away from the age of Enlightenment through to the Romantic movement of post-war peace, Nelson's demise was legendary: 'it was the ideal romantic death'.¹

This contrasts starkly with the log of HMS *Victory* for Tuesday 22 October which describes the action of the battle of Trafalgar fought the previous day:

ModtWd at 11.40 the action commenced between the Ry Sovereign and the rear of the enemy's line, at 11.50 the van of the enemy's line opened their fire on us, all sail set, at 12.12 opened our fire, at 12.20 in attempting to break through the enemy's line fell on board the 10th and 11th ships, the action became general with the van ships of both columns, at 1.15 the Right Honble Lord Viscount Nelson was wounded, at 1.30 the *Redoubtable* having struck ceased firing