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Book Review - Martin Robson, A history of the Royal Navy: the Napoleonic Wars

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Reviewer: Gareth Cole, Loughborough University

Book: A History of the Royal Navy. The Napoleonic Wars; Martin Robson; I.B. Tauris; London, 2014, pp. 273, hb, £20, ISBN: 978 1 78076 544 0

As Martin Robson states in the preface to this book, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were much more than 'Nelson's War' (xxi); close to 100,000 naval personnel lost their lives during the 22 years of conflict (231) and hundreds of thousands of others served.

Robson splits the Wars into two distinct periods; that of 1793-1805 was when the Royal Navy was attempting to obtain command of the seas and post-1805 when Britain was able to exercise the hard won command (4). Each period covers approximately half of the book (although the Battle of Trafalgar perhaps inevitably takes up 20 pages within the second half).

The first three chapters cover the period 1793-1802 and are split geographically with chapters on Home Waters, The Mediterranean, and The Global War. Chapter four looks at The Invasion Threat of 1802-05 and chapter five focuses on Trafalgar. Robson's second period is covered in four chapters: Home Waters and the Baltic; The Mediterranean and the Peninsular War; Economic Warfare; and The War of 1812. Usefully, there is also a short epilogue on the often forgotten Battle of Algiers in 1816.

The split in 1805 is perhaps obvious. Between 1793 and 1805 there were six fleet actions with Trafalgar being the last. However, after Trafalgar it was more a matter of luck than design that the battlefleets of France and Britain did not meet. On more than one occasion the British missed an opportunity to engage the French. Ganteaume's Mediterranean cruise in 1808 is perhaps the most famous example when Collingwood was unable to bring him to battle due to a lack of intelligence and bad weather. Pellew also twice failed to bring the French to a general action of Toulon in 1813 and 1814, again due in no small part to the vagaries of the weather. The fact the French actively tried to avoid battle and sent the fleets to sea with specific objectives adds strength to Robson's thesis.

The Royal Navy's purpose was, however, always far broader than fighting set piece battles and in this book Robson expertly links all the roles of the navy together. Fleet actions had their purpose of degrading French and Spanish seapower but command of the sea allowed Britain to attack her enemies in other ways. Blockade had the dual purpose of limiting the blockaded fleet's time at sea (and thus reducing their combat effectiveness when they did put to sea) and of reducing the imports and exports of goods. As such, they had an economic and military purpose. Fleet battles also had an economic dimension; both the Glorious First of June and the Battle of Cape St Vincent were fought because, respectively, the French and Spanish were at sea to escort an important convoy.

Blockading their opponents also allowed the British freedom to act abroad. Again, Robson superbly explains how British command at sea enabled the isolation and capture of French, Spanish, Dutch and Danish colonies - in many cases with local forces allowed to act because the main enemy battle fleets had either ceased to exist or were securely bottled up in port. Even when fleets did get out (e.g. Ganteaume) they actually accomplished very little strategically.

Closer to home, Robson demonstrates how the Royal Navy allowed the British army to fight in Spain and Portugal; most importantly by securing the supply lines. However, the navy also acted offensively in support of the army. Operations on the coast tied up numerous French troops which might otherwise have faced the Anglo-Portuguese army.

The effectiveness of seapower on land campaigns had already been shown in the Egyptian campaign when Sidney Smith assisted in holding Acre against Napoleon's army, capturing his siege train in the process and using the French forces own cannon against them. When operations went badly, the navy was also there to evacuate the army (as at Corunna). The difference with the French Army in Egypt which was forced to surrender *en masse* is striking.

Although a superb single volume study of the period, Robson's book is not without its faults. As part of a series, on more than one occasion he refers readers to other books in the series. For example, he covers the 1797 mutinies in three lines. More noticeably, he does not examine in any detail the bureaucracy and logistical support of the navy. The importance of coppering ships' bottoms is mentioned (e.g. the *Royal Sovereign's* sailing abilities at Trafalgar (127)), as are St Vincent's efforts against the perceived dockyard corruption (98-9). However, the administrative reforms of the period are glossed over (the formation of the Transport Board is mentioned in passing a few times). Nor does he describe how the Royal Navy was administered. As each volume in the series is designed to 'standalone' (xiv) then perhaps more on the non-naval, backroom, operations could have been included. Having said this, this reviewer is not sure what sections Robson could, or should, have left out to include this additional coverage.

These are small quibbles with what is an excellent single study of the Wars. To describe and analyse the role of the Royal Navy in a global, 22 year conflict is an achievement and Robson should be applauded for his success. The author himself states the impossibility of 'pouring a quart into a pint pot' (xvi). The Royal Navy may have fought fleet actions but it also blockaded enemy ports, raided enemy coasts, fought single ship actions, carried the army to foreign lands, acted as additional manpower ashore, protected British commerce and trade, and 'provided security in home waters' (231). Robson has effortlessly interweaved all these functions and more into a highly readable and accessible volume. It is highly recommended.