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B. R. Burg. *Boys at Sea: Sodomy, Indecency, and Courts Martial in Nelson's Navy.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xv + 245 pp. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-52228-2.

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The Full Monty

âA ship at sea,â wrote N. A. M. Rodger, âwas about the most difficult possible place to commit sodomy.... It is difficult to believe that there can have been any serious problem with a crime so much detested, but so seldom mentioned.â[1] Since Rodger published those words in 1986, historians have debated whether the silence of the archives means that homoerotic acts were âdetestedâ and rare on the kingâs ships, or so common as to scarcely warrant notice. *Boys at Sea* will not end that debate, but it advances our knowledge in several important respects, and challenges every aspect of Rodgerâs interpretation.

B. R. Burg examines several dozen court martials for sexual offences, mainly from the period between 1790 and 1820. Burg emphasizes that these court martials were âgrand showsâ requiring the participation of many officers, in full dress uniform, and had to be held on a large ship to accommodate the âsizeable audiencesâ that followed the proceedings (p. 46). The defendants were charged with a violation of either the second Article of War, which forbade âunclean and scandalous actionsâ or more seriously, with breaching the twenty-ninth article, involving the capital offence of sodomy (p. 67). Many of these cases generated lengthy transcripts featuring extremely graphic eyewitness testimony about organs, orifices, and fluids, followed by cross-examination on all the pertinent points. The court was intent on determining the facts, but Burg shows that the remarks of both witnesses and their questioners inadvertently supply a great deal of information about common attitudes and expected behavior in the Royal Navy. He also, ingeniously, cobbles together evidence from the transcripts to supply a very thorough answer to the question of whether it was possible to find a degree of privacy at sea. Burg shines a light into the secluded crannies of a warship, like the galley, the spaces in between the cannons, and the âcanvas cubbiesâ created by cloth partitions (p. 158).

Burgâs material came, inevitably, with its own built-in limitations. Court martials, which necessarily began with animosity and accusation emanating from some quarter, are going to tell us more about unwanted sexual advances than about consensual and reciprocal arrangements. Burgâs title, *Boys at Sea*, refers to the fact that

thirteen- or fourteen-year-old boys were the typical accusers in these court martials (although sometimes the boy kept silent until an older man intervened on his behalf). The severity of the punishment, even for a violation of the second article, was such that no one was going to cheerfully admit to âindecency,â and we find that a disproportionate number of the adult males in this book were–supposedly–taken advantage of in their sleep, or while they were in a drunken stupor. The circumstances of discovery usually permitted the benefit of the doubt for at least one participant. As Burg puts it: âMariners stumbling on buggering pairs did not sit down on handy chests or lean against nearby guns, light pipes, and wait to discover if the two switched positionsâ (p. 70). From such sources, it is easiest to reconstruct the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of those who participated against their will. In 1798, David Jenness was severely wounded by a boy who fought him off with a knife. Jenness needed medical attention and the shipâs surgeon got the true story out of him, resulting in a prosecution. At the trial, the boy remarked that he himself had told no one about Jennessâs behavior because he was âtoo ashamedâ (p. 76).

The court transcripts offer some access to the reactions of shipmates, many of whom were called to testify. William King âwrung his hands and was stuck [sic] with horrorâ when he discovered that two of his fellow seamen had committed sodomy (p. 50). There is a context for Kingâs panic in the widespread belief that God would punish an entire community for the sins of (even some of) its members. It is possible that King himself had something to hide, but more likely he was consumed with fear that God was about to sink the ship, or send a sea monster to finish it off. However, Burg persuasively demonstrates that many of the prosecutions described in *Boys at Sea* displayed a significant degree of pragmatism and restraint. There were few, if any, witch-hunts. âStrict legalityâ was the rule, not the exception (pp. 57-58). The twenty-ninth article carried the penalty of death, but it was also difficult to prove that both penetration and emission had occurred. In a few cases, vindictive shipmates charged forward at the moment of discovery and actually put their hands on the offending male organ in *flagrante delicto*, while shouting in order to draw the attention of the maximum possible number of witnesses. Some even testified to the sound of withdrawal, which resembled the removal of a cork from a bottle. The infrequency of prosecutions for this particular crime may have more to do with the rare conjunction of lewd zeal, personal enmity, and legal literacy than with the rarity of the act itself.

Many men who could have been charged under the twenty-ninth article were, instead, only charged under the second article, which was easier to prove in court. A number of participants in homoerotic acts also seem to have understood or characterized their own behavior as something short of sodomy. Consider this fairly representative example: âDuring their back-to-belly encounters, Noel adamantly insisted North only inserted his penis between his thighs. Again, the court believed the juvenile witness and convicted the marine of violating article number two.â The âadamantâ words of the boy, Noel, may communicate something about his own self-image; he had tolerated certain forms of sexual play, but he had not allowed himself to be buggered. It is difficult to see the so-called lesser or reduced charge as a trivial one; however; North, the marine, received three hundred lashes (p. 79). In two instances, Burg notes that men convicted of indecency were discharged on shore with notes âpinnedâ to their clothing enumerating their crimes, or âpublicly drummed … with the usual marks of ignominyâ (pp. 73, 107). This would seem to suggest that the navy left these individuals at the mercy of a crowd of strangers who were virtually invited to improvise their own punishments for a sex crime, but *Boys at Sea* does not explore the legal rationale or the implications of this dangerous practice.

Although Burg does not frame it in this way, there is tantalizing evidence in his sources of an informal âdonât ask, donât tellâ policy at sea. Consider the conduct of a surgeonâs mate, James Broadbill, in 1762. He was asked âby a group of crewmenâ to join them in peering into the keyhole of the boatswainâs cabin. Broadbill saw nothing more than a penis being held by a hand. He told his shipmates that this was just Mr. Garbut, the boatswain, âcreating of pleasure to himselfâ (p. 106). The assembled sailors remained adamant that a boy, John Pyle, was in there as well, but Broadbillâs canny interpretation spoke to a different issue. If masturbation was defined as a private matter of pleasure and not as an âuncleanness,â was it not possible to understand almost any act between men–short of actual penetration–in similar terms, as assisted masturbation, and therefore not worthy of notice (let alone communal vigils at the keyhole)? Even the most notorious court martial in *Boys at Sea*, the prosecution of sex crimes on HMS *Africaine* in 1815, seems to have been provoked not so much by the incidence of sodomy but by the unusually public nature of the sex acts. Instead of concealing themselves in the dark space in between the cannons, these men had sex standing up

against, or leaning over, the guns (p. 142). Andrew Johnson, the master at arms, âonce passed by a buggering pair without comment or interference even though his lantern provided enough light to see them plainly,â but âcopulating in plain view like dogsâ tested the limits of shipboard tolerance (p. 143).

Burg portrays his homoerotic seafarers as isolated from, and unlike, Londonâs molly subculture. He concludes: âThere is no way to understand what these men thought or felt. Surviving Admiralty documents do not reveal if their preferences ran toward men and boys or if their choice of same-sex partners was simply the result of deprivationâ (p. 60). Immediately after despairing of the possibility of any sort of imaginative reconstruction of their sexuality, Burg then offers something suspiciously like it: âthese men only used whatever was most easily available. Any convenient man, boy, hand, or anus would doâ (p. 60). This comes across as cavalier, particularly given that at least some of the sexual encounters in this book involved rape, and I would argue that it does not do justice to Burgâs own rich and disturbing source material. Consider Thomas Churchill, who learned that he was about to be accused of sodomy, went to his cabin without a word, and blew his brains out; or Hepburn Graham, who drew a spoon slowly across a childâs neck, miming a murderous act, and warned the boy to never tell anyone about what had been done to him. Burgâs reluctance to investigate the occasions when sex was about more than just sex limits the achievement of *Boys at Sea*, but it will also stimulate new debates that go beyond âdid they or didnât they.â All future discussions of this topic will be indebted to Burgâs courageous and meticulous scholarship.

Note

[1]. N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (New York: Norton, 1986), 80-81.

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