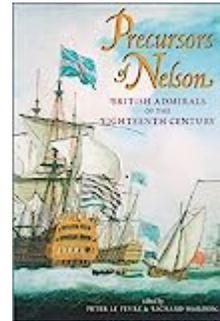


**Peter le Fevre, Richard Harding, ed.** *Precursors of Nelson: British Admirals of the Eighteenth Century*. Mechanicsburg, Penn: Stackpole Books, 2000. xii + 436 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8117-2901-7.



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The editors state (pp. xi-xii) that the commencement of the Nelson bicentennial period (1995-2005) inspired the creation of *Precursors of Nelson*. They also allude to the influence of the Napoleonic Wars naval novels (pp. 3, 401n.) as providing some impetus for another book of British naval history. For those acquainted with the social aspects of military or naval history or the view from below, this volume will disappoint. The social milieu of the officer corps is alluded to throughout, but this volume does not indicate how its subjects conform or deviate from the mass of officers. Sailors and petty officers are incidental to the book, except during the time of the fleet mutinies in the 1790s. The book has value as an introductory work to an important subject (one might say vital given that British naval supremacy played a major role in that country's hegemony).

The book consists of an introduction and fifteen chapters with sixteen biographies of British admirals from the last quarter of the seventeenth century to the early years of the nineteenth century. For the uninitiated the seventeen-page introduction may prove the most valuable portion of the book. It lucidly describes the administration, manpower issues, technology, communications, and leadership traits that made Britain's Royal Navy without equal. Although merely the binding element of a series of studies that becomes diffuse, this sec-

tion benefits from first-rate scholarship in the manuscript and printed primary sources. The subsequent chapters lack the compelling prose found in the introduction and their subject matter is naturally much more detailed.

The editors assembled thirteen noted historians to write the sixteen admirals' biographies: Arthur Herbert (by Peter Le Fevre), George Rooke and Cloudsley Shovell (John B. Hattendorf), George Byng (Chris Ware), Charles Wager (Daniel Baugh), John Norris (David Aldridge), Edward Vernon (Richard Harding), George Anson (N.A.M. Rodger), Edward Hawke (Ruddock Mackay), George Bridges (Kenneth Breen), Samuel Hood (Michael Duffy), Richard Howe (Roger Knight), Charles Middleton (Roger Morris), John Jervis (P.K. Crimmin), William Cornwallis (Andrew Lambert), and George Keith Elphinstone (Brian Lavery). The contributions by the subjects ranged from heroic leadership to tactical innovation (including communications/signals and revisions of *Fighting Instructions*) to administrative to political support of the navy to developing and implementing strategy. The biographies are not intended to be definite or inclusive of all significant flag officers. Instead, they provide some indication of the scope and time required by the Royal Navy to make an instrument of victory for Nelson (p. 4). The accounts, although providing greater detail than the entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, follow the format es-

tablished by that standard reference work. The meat of the book discusses at sea service, political and administrative activities, and campaigns. One learns what a particular officer accomplished and why or why not it was important. Attention is given to the familial and patronage ties that proved vital in an officer's upward mobility throughout the period. However, one ends each chapter with only a shadowy image of the man portrayed. Perhaps it would have been better to concentrate upon the practices and innovations that rendered these men significant within the context of the Royal Navy, rather than including their condensed biographies?

The quality and usefulness of the biographies is first-rate. In most cases the authors consulted both manuscript and printed primary sources. Only the treatments of Hawke and Cornwallis relied solely upon the latter. The previous scholarship on the selected group and the larger set that they represent is rather dated. The scholarly biographies of Anson, Hawke, Elphinstone, Rodney, and Vernon are generally thirty years or more old. The Navy Records Society has volumes devoted to Anson, Byng, Elphinstone, Hood, Jervis, Middleton, Rooke, and Vernon. Mahan in his *Types of Naval Officers* treated Hawke, Howe, Jervis, and Rodney establishing a precedent for this volume. However, as he analyzed them according to preconceived hypothesis about the effectiveness of battle fleet commanders, Mahan only provided a partial model. In other words the book makes an important contribution to the historiography of the subject.

That said, the scholarly apparatus of *Precursors* is uneven. Portraits of all the subjects illustrate the book. However, images of ships (either ship plans or paintings) and naval battles are noticeable by their absence. Geographically the volume ranges from the English Channel to the North Sea to the Baltic to the Mediterranean to the Caribbean, and Atlantic and Indian Oceans (with a brief foray into the Pacific). Nonetheless, there is not a single map to indicate theaters of action or ports. Readers will either need an excellent internal sense of the seas or an atlas at hand to follow the movements of the subjects. Also missing are the battle tracks that have been common to this genre since the days of Mahan. The notes are rendered at the end of the text. The bibliography only partially covers the works cited there. None of the manuscript sources appear there and the printed primary sources are limited to those of the Historical Manuscript Commission and Navy Records Society volumes. Like-

wise the secondary works reflect only a selection of the articles and books found in the endnotes. The book contains a serviceable index.

Upon consideration it is difficult to determine the intended audience of *Precursors*. Its lack of graphic materials makes it unappealing to the general or non-academic audience. Furthermore, its approach to the subject is hardly riveting. Newcomers to the subject would find N.A.M. Rodger's *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (1986) a better investment of their time. Academics will find the necessity of scouring the endnotes for sources annoying. For quick immersion into the lives of British admirals of the period, the *Dictionary of National Biography* would still prove useful to them. Naval officers might find *Precursors* instructive in that they will become aware that a successful navy requires leaders with talents beyond tactical or strategic skills. Finding a place in an undergraduate curriculum for the book seems impossible unless one was teaching a course on the naval foundations of the British Empire. (The secondary works cited in the bibliography would prove a better selection for that end.) As far as postgraduates are concerned, it would be more effective to assign them readings from the Navy Records Society volumes.

Further contemplation leads one to question the relevance of volumes such as *Precursors*. Within the academic and the museum worlds, the current trend is to examine the previously ignored. Surely the foundations of British supremacy resided with the quality of the crews of that country's warships? Indeed that point appears time and again throughout *Precursors* with many essays addressing the subject's involvement in that vital topic. A total abandonment of studies of the officer corps would replace one flawed perspective with an equally skewed one. When incompetence was rife (as seen in the French, Spanish, Neapolitan, and Swedish navies, for instance), explaining success certainly provides historians with a subject worthy of analysis. In other words, one may move beyond the great men, famous ships, and crucial weapons while still addressing a vital question not only of European, but world history—how did Britain manage to establish a state of hegemony by 1815? Much of that tale is to be found within the wooden world and its associated shore and mercantile establishments. Therefore, more books on Britain's naval history from 1660 to 1814 are necessary. Just not ones concentrating on a handful of exceptional individuals such as *Precursors*.

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