

A Social History of Midshipmen and Quarterdeck Boys
in the Royal Navy, 1761-1831.

In 2 Volumes
(Volume 1 of 2)

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Signed: S. A. Cavell

ABSTRACT

Many senior officers in the Royal Navy of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries saw the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars as a time of dramatic social change. Naval and civilian commentators alike expressed concern that the virtue of birth had replaced the virtue of merit when it came to the selection of officer recruits, and that the change adversely affected discipline and subordination. This thesis seeks to test the accuracy of these observations, and modern interpretations of them, by determining when and why changes in the social make-up of the corps of “young gentlemen” took place, and the effects of those changes on naval professionalism.

This study asserts that social developments in the navy’s officer corps are most transparent at the entry level. Data on the social backgrounds of more than 4500 midshipmen and quarterdeck boys, from 1761 to 1831, shows that the presence of the social elites among officer aspirants was directly affected by states of war and peace and the popularity of a naval career for well-born sons. While contemporaries saw a growing elitism among officer recruits between 1793 and 1815, the data suggests that the scions of peers and the landed gentry were more prevalent in the peacetime service of 1771 and again after 1815, when the weight of social and political connections again became determining factors in the selection of officer trainees. The cultural changes that influenced the popularity of a naval career for young “honourables” between the Seven Years’ War and Parliamentary Reform highlight the social and political pressures that were exerted on recruiting captains and the Admiralty. Together they help to explain developments in the social make-up of the navy’s future-officer corps and the relationship between the naval microcosm and British society at large.

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LIST OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

CD-ROM attached at the end of Volume 2 with Primary Databases and Appendices F-N.

CONVENTIONS

Dates

Dates before the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1752 are given in old style, but the New Year is taken as beginning on January 1 throughout.

Numbers

As this study presents a vast amount of numerical data the following format has been followed for greater legibility.

- Numbers up to seventy-five are written out, long form, except when they appear as percentages or as a comparative expression such as “43 of 128.”
- All numbers greater than seventy-five are expressed numerically.
- All percentages are shown as a number followed by the long form, “percent”

e.g. 16 percent. Footnotes use the symbol “%” for brevity.