THE MID-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NAVY
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF CAPTAIN THOMAS BURNETT AND HIS PEERS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the concerns of mid-eighteenth century naval captains through the careers of Captain Thomas Burnett and the cohort of thirty five officers who were posted captain in 1757 soon after the start of the Seven Years’ War. A subsidiary cohort, that of the 129 lieutenants who were, like Burnett, first commissioned in 1744 is used as a control against which to measure the statistical worth of the smaller cohort. Examination of the day to day concerns of the captains has been made possible through the rich and varied resource of their letters to the Admiralty, which have hitherto been little used as a source by historians. Despite the formality of these letters not merely the concerns but also the personalities and characters of the writers are vividly conveyed.

After tracing the career of Thomas Burnett this thesis examines the 1757 cohort and its progression to the rank of master and commander. At this point the correspondence with the Admiralty begins. The influences, ‘interest’ and formative experiences behind their appointments are considered. The duties of the mid-eighteenth century captain are outlined, as their relationship with the Admiralty is analysed and the extent to which they were kept under strict Admiralty control by precedent and financial scrutiny is demonstrated. All aspects of manning are shown to dominate the daily concerns of captains. The extent to which ‘interest’ or chance gave them the opportunity to display their professional expertise and increase their standing within the active naval corps is weighed. Tracking this cohort beyond the war into the years of peace and subsequent wars has revealed the extent to which the timing of being made post captain was crucial and that ‘interest’ was more significant than merit in accelerating and promoting active careers.
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Abbreviations

NMM = National Maritime Museum

SNR = Society for Nautical Research

ODNB = Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. In this study throughout the edition
used has been that available online at www.oxforddnb.com

Bibliography