

**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.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	8
1 The questions to be answered in this thesis.....	12
2 The current state of knowledge about the mid-eighteenth century navy .....	13
3 The justification for writing this thesis .....	17
4 The material used to answer the questions posed above.....	18
5 The development of the argument.....	20
Chapter 1 The influences on the life of Captain Thomas Burnett c1724 – 1783 and the main events in his professional career. ....	27
1 The court connection which could influence the life of a naval captain.....	27
2 The extent to which going to sea as a ‘young gentleman’ was evidence of family influence.....	30
3 Being ‘made post’ as the result of courage and enterprise in his first independent command.....	33
4 The continuing need for ‘interest’ during and after the peace which ended the Seven Years’ War .....	37
5 Thomas Burnett’s peers: a bench mark against which to measure his career ..	41
Chapter 2 The cohort of ‘young gentlemen’ who were commissioned as lieutenants and their progress through the rank of master and commander to post captain in 1757 .....	43
1 The ‘interest’ which took Thomas Burnett to sea .....	43
2 The routes on board followed by Thomas Burnett’s peers .....	45
3 The ‘passing certificate’ for lieutenant.....	46
4 The change in status for a newly commissioned lieutenant.....	51
5 The pattern of first commissions issued during the inter-war years. ....	52
6 The influences and ‘interest’ behind the appointments of Burnett and his peers as Masters and Commanders.....	54
7 The importance of convoy duty in providing a valuable training ground and opportunities to prove professional expertise at the outset of a naval career. ....	60

8	The experiences of the Commanders which lead to their postings in 1757 .....	73
9	The difference between Thomas Burnett's experience and that of his 'late starting' peers. ....	80
Chapter 3 The tools of the trade: a captain's duties regarding his ship's fabric and equipment, and her influence on his career. ....		
		81
1	The duties of a captain when his ship is in dock.....	81
2	Duties of a captain as regards the fighting qualities of his ship.....	89
3	Duties of a captain as regards the ordnance of his ship .....	99
4	Navigation .....	105
5	Defects in ships, fir-builds and French captures .....	111
6	Orders .....	121
7	Conclusion.....	122
Chapter 4 The relationship of Thomas Burnett and his peers with the Admiralty..		
		124
1	System of communication between the administration and officers.....	124
2	The individual voices which can still be heard through the formality of correspondence through clerks .....	126
3	The degree to which Thomas Burnett and his peers were rigidly controlled by pay rather than promotion.....	130
4	Payments to officers delayed by precedent .....	143
5	Requirement for charting unfamiliar waters .....	146
6	The significance of half pay for commissioned officers .....	147
7	The application for and granting of leave to captains .....	150
8	Corruption .....	153
9	Conclusion.....	154
Chapter 5 Manning the mid-eighteenth century navy .....		
		156
1	Standing and warrant officers .....	156
2	The recruitment of seamen to the Navy .....	162
3	The retention of 'followings' of young gentlemen and of crew members.....	177

4	Health .....	181
5	Discharge, desertion and death.....	191
6	Discipline and courts martial.....	201
7	Conclusion.....	203
Chapter 6 The opportunities for individuals to display their professional expertise and courage. 205		
1	The global theatres of the Seven Years' War.....	206
2	Spain and the Falkland Islands 1770-3 .....	240
3	American War of Independence.....	241
4	Conclusion.....	256
Chapter 7 Success and failure amongst Thomas Burnett's peers .....		
1	Possible criteria for the measurement of success .....	259
2	Summary of employment between the wars .....	265
3	Summary of careers of successful captains who did not achieve flags.....	266
4	Promotion to flag rank.....	270
5	Luck.....	283
6	The characteristics of a successful captain.....	284
7	Why did these men go into the navy and did they achieve what they sought?286	
8	Conclusion.....	290

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1: Burnett's peers as a significant proportion of active captains.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Table 2: Movements of Thomas Burnett from his first appearance in 1736 to his first commission in 1744 .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Table 3: Summary of careers at sea before their first commissions for the men whose Passing Certificates were found.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Table 4: Proportion of sloops used in convoy protection 1755-58.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Table 5: Elements of Edmund Affleck's deployments on convoy protection .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Table 6: Falconers's comparison of Bentinck pump and previous system.....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Table 7: Costs of a sample of French vessels taken into Navy.....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>Table 8: Weekly allowance of food on board .....</b>	<b>186</b>
<b>Table 9: Reasons for discharge in 1756.....</b>	<b>191</b>
<b>Table 10: Reasons for discharge in 1777.....</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>Table 11: Descriptions of deserters .....</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>Table 12: Casualties reported in single-handed actions with French vessels.....</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>Table 13: Dates of promotions to flag rank.....</b>	<b>274</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Lieutenants Commissioned between 1741 and 1745 .....	53
Figure 2: Total number of 1744 lieutenants and promotion achieved .....	54

## **List of Appendices**

Appendix 1: Summary of careers of cohort of men first commissioned in 1744

Appendix 2: Summary of careers of men first posted in 1757

Appendix 3: Five generation Burnet family tree

Appendix 4: Summary of influences and ‘interest’ which contributed to  
Thomas Burnett and his peers being made post in 1757

Appendix 5: (folded into pocket in back cover) Summary of careers of  
Thomas Burnett and his peers

Appendix 6: Commissioned ships

## **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](http://www.oxforddnb.com)

## **Bibliography**