

The War at Sea: Trafalgar and Beyond

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As the Napoleonic Wars neared their end, it was easy for observers to consider the war as one fought principally on land. After all, the last years of the conflict were marked by vast military operations in the Iberian Peninsula, Russia and Germany that saw armies of hundreds of thousands of individuals compete for supremacy of Western Europe, and Napoleon suffered his final defeat on land at the Battle of Waterloo. The focus on these great campaigns meant that, for many, the naval war went unnoticed. In the summer of 1812, the naval officer Rear Admiral Sir Sidney Smith wrote to the prime minister, Lord Liverpool, in an attempt to raise awareness of the relative inattention being paid the maritime element. ‘The *navy* has surely not the less merit for having worked itself out of employment by destroying all opposition on the coasts of the four quarters of the globe’, he insisted, and set out its vital role in the conflict.¹ Smith was not known for his perceptive analysis, and his pleas went unheeded. The celebrations following the end of the war favoured the army above all else, and while Lord Castlereagh stood up in Parliament to propose a national monument to the fallen dead of the Peninsular War, no such monument was suggested for the many thousands of naval seamen who had given their lives in the conflict. Perhaps the most telling observation came from Jane Austen. In her 1817 unfinished novel *Sanditon*, she had the leading character Mr Parker regret naming his house after Trafalgar as ‘Waterloo is more the thing now’.² Austen had two

1 Sidney Smith to Lord Liverpool, 8 July 1812, quoted in Michael W. McCahill, ‘Peerage Creations and the Changing Character of the British Nobility, 1750–1850’, in Clyve Jones and David Lewis Jones (eds), *Peers, Politics and Power: The House of Lords 1603–1911* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986), 420–1 (emphasis original).

2 Margarette Lincoln, *Representing the Royal Navy: British Sea Power, 1750–1815* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 185–6.

brothers serving in the navy, and knew better than most the role it had played in the conflict; Parker's statement should be read as a critical – if subtle – commentary on the public mood.

In the two centuries since Napoleon's defeat in 1815, historians have followed a similar path and downplayed the importance of the naval war. For most, the end of the war at sea occurred in 1805 with the decisive Battle of Trafalgar, an action that is deemed to have crushed Napoleon's maritime aspirations once and for all. Furthermore, so the argument goes, the battle secured for Britain a mastery of the seas that would last the remainder of the war, and indeed lead directly to the nineteenth-century Pax Britannica. Received wisdom is a powerful force, and these ideas have proven trenchant. Astute scholars questioned this prevailing idea throughout the twentieth century, but to little effect. Writing in 1922, Julian Corbett noted historians' tendency to celebrate Nelson's victory without much thought for the ten years of naval warfare that followed. 'So brilliant was the triumph in which the greatest Admiral of all time came to his end', he wrote, 'that the dramatic sense of the historian almost compels him to ring down the curtain there and then.'³ Writing a generation later, Piers Mackesy complained that 'the struggle at sea has generally been written as though it ended at Trafalgar, before the war had run a quarter of its course'.⁴ However, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the idea that the naval war was all but over in 1805 was accepted as orthodoxy in most general histories of the period.⁵

It is only relatively recently that historians have begun to consider how naval events shaped the wider course of the conflict. A number of authoritative publications have attempted to redress the relative ignorance of the post-Trafalgar period, albeit as part of works covering much longer periods.⁶ Alongside this has come a wealth of narrower studies that have concentrated

3 Julian Corbett, 'Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar', *Quarterly Review*, 237 (1922), 238–55.

4 Piers Mackesy, *The War in the Mediterranean 1803–1810* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), vii.

5 See, for example, Tim Blanning, who notes that after Trafalgar, 'British maritime supremacy was absolute'. Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648–1815* (London: Viking Penguin, 2007), 656. Writing in his magisterial history of England, Boyd Hilton noted that Trafalgar, 'effectively guaranteed British naval supremacy for the remainder of the war'. Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, Dangerous People? England 1783–1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 106.

6 N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2005) 528–74; Roger Knight, *Britain against Napoleon: The Organization of Victory 1793–1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2013); Peter Padfield, *Maritime Power and the Struggle for Freedom: Naval Campaigns that Shaped the Modern World* (London: John Murray, 2003); Roy Adkins and Lesley Adkins, *The War for All the Oceans: From Nelson at the Nile to Napoleon at Waterloo* (London: Little Brown, 2006).

on specific aspects of the naval war. While the 2005 bicentenary celebrations spawned a myriad of histories of Trafalgar, and an even greater profusion of biographies of Horatio Nelson, the subsequent years have generated a remarkable range of accounts of the conflict beyond 1805. What is more, these have included scholarship not just by 'naval' historians, but by scholars interested in the wider imperial, economic and socio-cultural contexts in which navies operated. Historians of the British Empire have noted the centrality of the navy to colonial acquisitions, while naval power has been placed at the heart of Britain's 'turn to the East'.⁷ Economic historians have acknowledged the importance of maritime warfare to the expansion of British trade, and the ultimate defeat of Napoleon's 'Continental System'.⁸ There have been numerous works that consider the social structure of navies, and the degree to which they shaped (and were shaped by) wider cultural developments.⁹ Added to this are countless studies of specific battles,

- 7 See for example, Michael Duffy, 'World-Wide War and British Expansion, 1793–1815', in P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 184–207; Peter Ward, *British Naval Power in the East, 1794–1805: The Command of Admiral Peter Rainier* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013); John McAleer and Christer Petley (eds), *The Royal Navy and the British Atlantic World, c. 1750–1820* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 8 Silvia Marzagalli, 'Napoleon's Continental Blockade: An Effective Substitute to Naval Weakness?', in Bruce A. Elleman and S. C. M. Paine (eds), *Naval Blockades and Seapower: Strategies and Counter-Strategies 1805–2005* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 25–33; Katherine Aalestad, 'Revisiting the Continental System: Exploitation to Self-Destruction in the Napoleonic Empire', in Philip G. Dwyer and Alan Forrest (eds), *Napoleon and His Empire: Europe, 1804–1814* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Katherine B. Aalestad and Johan Joor (eds), *Revisiting Napoleon's Continental System: Local, Regional and European Experiences* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Gavin Daly, 'Napoleon and the "City of Smugglers"', *The Historical Journal* 50(2) (June 2007), 333–52.
- 9 On the British navy, see S. A. Cavell, *Midshipmen and Quarterdeck Boys in the British Navy, 1771–1831* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2012); J. Ross Dancy, *The Myth of the Press Gang: Volunteers, Impression and the Naval Manpower Problem in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015); Ellen Gill, *Naval Families, War and Duty in Britain, 1740–1820* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016); Thomas Malcomson, *Order and Disorder in the British Navy 1793–1815: Control, Resistance, Flogging and Hanging* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016); Evan Wilson, *A Social History of British Naval Officers, 1775–1815* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016). On the Danish and Swedish navies, see Evan Wilson, Jakob Serrup and AnnaSara Hammer, 'The Education and Careers of Naval Officers in the Long Eighteenth Century: An International Perspective', *Journal for Maritime Research*, 15(1) (2015), 17–33. A broader work is Evan Wilson, Jakob Serrup and AnnaSara Hammer (eds), *Eighteenth-Century Naval Officers: A Transnational Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). On the cultural reception of maritime warfare in this period, see Paul A. Gilfe, *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights in the War of 1812* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Timothy Jenks, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy, 1793–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Lincoln, *Representing the Navy*; David Cannadine (ed.), *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

individuals – both officers and sailors – and geographic regions that witnessed naval warfare, as well as histories that focus specifically on the final ten years of maritime conflict.¹⁰

Central to all of these studies is the simple notion that the war at sea did not end in 1805, and that it was crucial to the war's outcome. This requires a more sophisticated approach to what we might call the 'legend of Trafalgar'. While it remains a dazzling tactical success, founded in a rich and powerful story of heroism and national martyrdom, many aspects of its triumphalist narrative do not stand up to scrutiny. Trafalgar was certainly a crushing defeat for the French and the Spanish navies, but it was not as overwhelming as it could have been. Numerous British captains underperformed, allowing many enemy ships to escape. The battle did not, as some have claimed, end the invasion threat from Napoleon; the immediate danger had dissipated months before the Trafalgar, while the prospect of a French invasion continued to worry the British public, government ministers and the Royal Navy from 1807 to 1810.¹¹ Trafalgar did nothing to change the direction of the war; just weeks after the battle, Napoleon won his greatest victory at Austerlitz, defeating the Austrian and Russian armies, knocking both out of the war, and leaving France the dominant power on the continent. Nor, crucially, did Trafalgar end the war at sea. In the aftermath of the victory, France remained the second naval power of Europe, with squadrons at large in the North Atlantic.¹²

The naval war was far from over; on the contrary, it was very much alive. Napoleon began a vast shipbuilding programme in the aftermath of Trafalgar with the goal of building 150 ships of the line, a figure that would ensure an irresistible superiority over the British fleet; Britain never had more than 113 ships of the line at any one time. By 1809, the French Toulon fleet was as large

¹⁰ See in particular, James Davey, *In Nelson's Wake: The Navy and the Napoleonic Wars* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2015), from which this chapter derives many of its ideas. See also Martin Robson, *A History of the Royal Navy: The Napoleonic Wars* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014). For an analysis of the French navy during this period, see Kenneth G. Johnson, 'Napoleon's War at Sea', in Michael V. Leggiere (ed.), *Napoleon and the Operational Art of War: Essays in Honor of Donald D. Horward* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 387–475. Please see the bibliographic essay for further examples.

¹¹ The argument that Trafalgar ended the threat of invasion can be found in J. S. Watson, *The Reign of George III, 1760–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 433; David Andress, *The Savage Storm: Britain on the Brink in the Age of Napoleon* (London: Little Brown, 2012), 124; Roy Adkins, *Trafalgar: The Biography of a Battle* (London: Little Brown, 2005), 12, 277–8, 288.

¹² N. A. M. Rodger, 'The Significance of Trafalgar: Sea Power and Land Power in the Anglo-French Wars', in David Cannadine (ed.), *Trafalgar in History: A Battle and its Afterlife* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 86.

as the British force blockading it, and in 1811 a French report noted confidently that they were not far from achieving their ambitious shipbuilding target. By 1813, the French fleet had been rebuilt, consisting of over eighty ships, with another thirty-five under construction.¹³ Right until the end of the war, British naval superiority over France was far from guaranteed. Nor would the war at sea be confined to the conflict between these two protagonists, for as the French Empire grew steadily in the aftermath of Trafalgar, the fleets of neutral nations were placed within Napoleon's easy grasp. Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Spain and Portugal all had sizeable navies, which taken together would have easily swung the balance of the naval war in Napoleon's favour as each were either overrun, or forced to ally with the French emperor. The war at sea therefore grew to incorporate most of the nations of Europe, as well as American and Turkish forces, in a naval conflict that became truly global. In these years, the actions of the Royal Navy ensured that ninety-nine battleships belonging to other European powers were either destroyed or added to the British fleet. For Napoleon, this was a loss that far outstripped the defeat at Trafalgar.¹⁴ Far from its naval mastery being assured, Britain's dominance at sea required constant vigilance over a series of enemies.

This chapter will argue that, from 1803 through to 1815, the naval war was a crucial part of the conflagration that engulfed Europe. Indeed, the significance of naval conflict goes beyond calculations of victory and defeat. The war at sea also shaped the wider economic, social and cultural transformations that ran alongside the Napoleonic Wars; be they, the clash of rival economies, the blurring of the distinction between civilians and combatants or the advancement of European nationalism. The chapter will begin by focusing on the early years of the war, focusing specifically on Napoleon's attempts to invade Britain, the various naval plans put into motion to bring that about, culminating in the Battle of Trafalgar. We will then move on to consider this battle in more detail, and suggest that, while culturally symbolic, it was far from a decisive encounter. Subsequent sections of the chapter will then consider the manifest ways in which the war at sea continued in earnest: through the extension of empire, economic warfare, amphibious

¹³ Richard Glover, 'The French Fleet, 1807–1814: Britain's Problem; and Madison's Opportunity', *Journal of Modern History*, 39(3) (September 1967), 234–5; Philip Dwyer, *Citizen Emperor: Napoleon in Power* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 269–9; Edward Brenton, *The Naval History of Great Britain from 1793–1822* (London, 1823–25), Vol. IV, 3; Roger Morriss, *The Foundations of British Maritime Ascendancy: Resources, Logistics and the State, 1755–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 53.

¹⁴ Glover, 'The French Fleet', 234; Dwyer, *Citizen Emperor*, 269–9.

operations and naval raids. This is not an attempt to disregard or denigrate the role of the other military forces that took place in the conflict, or belittle the efforts of guerrilla resistance movements that are covered so adeptly elsewhere in this volume. Nor is it an attempt to admonish historians whose focus has tended towards the land. While the war at sea certainly became less visible in the latter years of the conflict, this chapter suggests that it was just as important in explaining the war's outcome.

Invasion

From Britain's perspective, the war that broke out in 1803 was first and foremost a naval conflict. As an 'island nation' – and one in which populations and governments remained suspicious of standing armies – British security had come to rest on a strong and observant navy capable of preventing an invasion from the European continent, and protecting its imperial and maritime trading connections around the world. As the *Morning Post* noted in 1804:

we believe that by a judicious exertion of our naval force, seconded perhaps by some occasional expeditions, the advantage of the war may be on our side, and the enemy may feel himself so straitened and distressed, as to wish for peace.¹⁵

Since the 1730s, a naval, 'Blue-Water' strategy that promised the acquisition of wealth and empire, as well as national security, was tried and tested.¹⁶ British satisfaction with this policy had been confirmed by the Seven Years' War, in which increased expenditure on the navy, investments in infrastructure and more ambitious strategies allowed imperial captures on an unprecedented scale. The French Revolutionary Wars of 1793–1801 saw Britain following a similar policy, prioritising national defence and imperial expansion over continental commitment, albeit with less satisfactory conclusions. A series of French invasion attempts – in particular, the landing of 1,400 troops in Fishguard in 1797 – had shown that Britain's 'wooden walls' could be splintered, while the terms of the Treaty of Amiens in 1801–2 demonstrated that, for the first time, British imperial conquests could be outmatched by

¹⁵ *Morning Post*, 25 August 1804.

¹⁶ Daniel A. Baugh, 'Great Britain's "Blue-Water" Policy, 1689–1815', *The International History Review*, 10(1) (February 1988), 33–58. See also Philip Woodfine, 'Ideas of Naval Power and the Conflict with Spain, 1737–1742', in Jeremy Black and Philip Woodfine (eds), *The British Navy and the Use of Naval Power in the Eighteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988), 71–90.

French continental aggrandisement. However, with the coming of war once again in 1803, the British had neither the army nor the diplomatic support to attempt a major continental offensive. It quickly found itself fighting a naval war for national survival, alone and on the defensive.

In the first two-and-a-half years of the conflict, the navy's role was obvious. France was well placed to launch an invasion of Britain, and within a few months of the outbreak of war, a formidable army of over 100,000 troops was assembled along the French coast, and a vast flotilla of boats and barges constructed to transport the troops across the Channel. Napoleon's plan was simple. In summer, frequent calms occur in the English Channel, and he believed that these conditions would render British naval ships impotent by the lack of wind, allowing an oar-driven invasion fleet to cross the Channel. Failing that, he would use the French navy to secure a temporary command of the Channel, allowing his invasion flotilla to be escorted across. This was not, as some historians have suggested, an illogical idea. Admiral Lord Keith, who saw first-hand the scale of Napoleon's preparations, feared that Napoleon's plan was eminently achievable.¹⁷ For the next two years, Britain was consumed by a fear of invasion; paranoia and xenophobia became pronounced, not helped by a slew of alarmist publications that promised unprecedented horrors were the French to land.¹⁸

With only a small army to call upon, the defence of the nation rested on the Royal Navy, in particular the large fleets that were stationed off Brest, Toulon and Rochefort to blockade the French navy in port. Another force under Admiral Keith was stationed off Boulogne to watch Napoleon's invasion flotilla and prevent it from escaping; whenever any enemy vessels left the sanctuary of the coastal fortifications, they were either captured or driven back by the blockading force. This was too reactive for many, however, and plans were considered to attack and destroy the force preparing to cross the Channel. A number of bizarre proposals were undertaken. The first and perhaps the most remarkable of these schemes was the 'stone ships' expedition of early 1804, a plan to block the harbour of Boulogne by scuttling three vessels loaded with stone 'piers' in the harbour's entrance, thereby rendering the port completely useless. It proved impossible to execute: poor weather, changing tides and the overwhelming strength of the French batteries meant that the ships could not be placed. Other attacks were planned involving a new and revolutionary weapon: the torpedo, which had been developed by

17 See Keith to Admiralty, 6 July 1803, C. C. Lloyd (ed.), *The Letters and Papers of Viscount Keith* (London: Navy Records Society, 1950), Vol. III, 134–5.

18 Davey, *In Nelsons' Wake*, 45–8.

an American inventor named Robert Fulton. The torpedoes created spectacular explosions, but proved ineffective and did no permanent damage. Napoleon lost no time in describing the attacks dismissively as 'breaking the windows of the good citizens of Boulogne with English guineas'.¹⁹

Despite the failure of these attempts, the navy was able to blockade the French forces in port, resulting in a strategic stand-off throughout 1803–4. Britain's control of the Channel prevented any French invasion attempt, but it was unable to affect Napoleon's command of the European continent. In late 1804, this stalemate ended when Spain declared war on Britain. Struggling to win a conflict against one major European nation, Britain was faced with an extra adversary. The war with Spain fundamentally altered the strategic picture and transformed the war at sea. The fleet available to Napoleon was instantly doubled in size to 102 ships of the line, against only eighty-three British ships in sea-going condition. For the first time since the outbreak of war, Britain faced a numerically superior navy, and Napoleon was quick to realise the possibilities presented by his new ally. He conceived numerous plans that would allow him to concentrate his naval forces and overwhelm the British fleets. Between September 1804 and September 1805, no fewer than eight major plans were considered and attempted, all aimed at providing France with a temporary command of the Channel.²⁰

It was not until April 1805 that the French came close to concentrating their naval forces effectively, when French Admiral Villeneuve escaped from Toulon, confounding Vice Admiral Nelson, who was blockading his force in port. The French aim was simple: to head to the Caribbean and thus threaten British imperial possessions there, forcing Nelson to chase and in the process luring this vital fleet away from Europe. The French would then swiftly turn back to Europe and take a temporary command of the English Channel, allowing Napoleon's invasion force to cross the Channel unmolested. Having initially miscalculated, Nelson's pursuit of Villeneuve was swift. However, having raided a series of British possessions, Villeneuve ordered his force back to Europe, once again pursued by Nelson's fleet. On reaching the coast of France, the French were intercepted by a small force under Rear Admiral Calder and, after an inconclusive action, Villeneuve

19 Abraham Crawford, *Reminiscences of a Naval Officer during the Late War: With Sketches and Anecdotes of Distinguished Commanders*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1851), Vol. I, 145–7; H. F. B. Wheeler, and A. M. Broadley, *Napoleon and the Invasion of England: The Story of the Great Terror* (Stroud: Nonsuch Publishing, rpr. 2007; first edn., 1908), 253, 255; Wallace Hutcheon, Jr., *Robert Fulton: Pioneer of Undersea Warfare* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1981), 81–2.

20 Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 532.

withdrew to Vigo and ultimately to Cadiz. The planned concentration had failed, and as Napoleon waited in vain at Boulogne for the combined fleet to arrive, he was confronted with a new threat. Over the previous months, William Pitt's administration's efforts to create a new European alliance against Napoleon had finally borne fruit, and by August 1805 Austrian and Russian armies were on the march. Faced with a new continental alliance, and aware that his naval strategy had come to nought, Napoleon abandoned the Boulogne camps on 26 August 1805 and marched his army towards Germany and Austria.²¹ The invasion threat was, for now, over.

Trafalgar

With Napoleon facing a new military threat on land, there was no need for the French navy to leave port and risk battle. Much of Napoleon's navy had survived, and with the French able to build new ships more quickly than the British, their best plan of action was to remain in port until they had the numbers to balance British operational superiority. Napoleon, however, had other ideas, and in September 1805 he ordered the combined fleet to sail to the Mediterranean to support an attack on Sicily; by the afternoon of 20 October the entire fleet was at sea. At first light on the morning of 21 October 1805, the British spotted the enemy force heading south from Cadiz; after two years of warfare, the Royal Navy finally had an opportunity to force a decisive battle and destroy two of the largest French and Spanish fleets. The subsequent battle was not a foregone conclusion. The British approach, at a right angle to the combined French and Spanish fleet, was the naval equivalent of a full-frontal assault. The British were travelling at only one-and-a-half knots, and were horribly exposed to the repeated fire of the enemy; only when they reached the enemy line would they be able to fire back. They also faced a numerically superior enemy. The combined fleet had thirty-three ships of the line to Nelson's twenty-seven, and almost double the number of seamen: 30,000 compared to 17,000. They also had a significant advantage in terms of the number of guns, with 2,632 guns ranged against 2,148.²²

Nelson's tactics were not original or even unusual; they were simple and audacious. Dividing a force into two or more divisions had been discussed

21 Christopher D. Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War, 1803–1815* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 113–5.

22 Michael Duffy, "'All was hushed up': The Hidden Trafalgar", *Mariner's Mirror*, 91(2) (May 2005), 219; Roger Knight, 'The Fleets at Trafalgar', in Cannadine (ed.), *Trafalgar in History*, 61.

as early as 1794, and in 1797 Duncan had attacked with two columns at the Battle of Camperdown. However, Nelson was the first naval command with the confidence – both in himself and his officers – to execute it on such a grand scale.²³ Nelson would command one division, while his second in command, Vice Admiral Collingwood, was given control of a second, with licence to act independently. Nelson's plans were finely tuned to the nation's war aims: with Britain fighting a total war, he aimed for a victory of extermination, and in the weeks before the battle, Nelson spoke repeatedly of annihilating the enemy. On 6 October he wrote to George Rose that 'it is . . . annihilation that the country wants, and not merely a splendid victory', while to Collingwood days later he spoke of the 'one great object in view', namely 'that of annihilating our enemies, and getting a glorious peace for our country'.²⁴ Nelson's tactics depended on a calculated risk that British naval gunnery was vastly superior to its enemies'. British gun crews could fire more accurately and far more quickly, while the guns themselves were far more reliable than their French counterparts; each cannon was tested thirty times before it was put on board a ship. It also relied on speed and surprise; studding sails would be used to ensure they closed the enemy as quickly as possible, while the fleet's division into two parts would ensure a concentration of force.²⁵

The leading ships of the British fleet suffered from a terrible bombardment from the enemy as they approached. However, as ship after ship entered the action, the French were increasingly subjected to the firepower of British guns. Collingwood's line got into action first; like Nelson, his division was extremely vulnerable as it approached the combined fleet. Within twenty minutes of Collingwood's first broadside, the next seven ships of his division had joined him in the action, though the remainder of his division would arrive in the battle much later. To the north, *Victory* also cut through the enemy line, though the ships towards the rear would be

23 Knight, 'Fleets at Trafalgar', 62; Roger Knight, *Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 507–8.

24 Nelson to Rose, 6 October 1805, in Nicholas Harris Nicholas (ed.), *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; first edn., 1844–6), Vol. VII, 80; Nelson to Collingwood, 9 October 1805, in Nicholas (ed.), *Dispatches*, Vol. VII, 80; Duffy, 'All was hushed up', 217.

25 National Maritime Museum [hereafter cited as NMM], COD/5/9/4 – Trafalgar Memorandum, signed by Nelson, 9 October 1805; Knight, *Pursuit of Victory*, 502–7; Knight, 'The Fleets at Trafalgar', 62; N. A. M. Rodger, 'Nelson and the British Navy: Seamanship, Leadership and Originality', in David Cannadine (ed.), *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2005), 24–6; Duffy, 'All was hushed up', 218–9.

similarly tardy. For the first hour of the battle the fighting was conducted by only eight of Collingwood's ships and a mere five of Nelson's. However, the two divisions were now beginning to overwhelm the enemy's centre; for the first time that morning, it was the French who were outnumbered and out-gunned. It became clear that Nelson's calculated risk had paid off; on reaching the French and Spanish line the speed and regularity of British firepower had overwhelmed the enemy, and ship after enemy ship surrendered to the withering fire of the British guns. The French and Spanish had lost eighteen vessels, whereas not one British ship had been captured or sunk.²⁶

The crude arithmetic of ships and men confirmed the British victory, but in the aftermath of battle, doubts were cast about the conduct of many of the ships' captains. The worst accusations were reserved for the ships that had failed to come into the action until very late in the day, allowing many enemy ships to flee. In total, fifteen enemy ships escaped, and the feeling among the survivors was that the victory could have been more complete. Collingwood, who had assumed command of the British fleet, was well aware of the missed opportunity, but understood the political importance of a victory unsullied by talk of cowardice or incompetence. He left any such misgivings out of his official dispatches, and instead heralded a 'complete and glorious victory'.²⁷ Back in London, the Admiralty understood that the battle was not a complete victory and that it had not ended the war at sea. There remained over seventy-five ships of the line in enemy ports and four major enemy squadrons were at large in the North Atlantic. From the outset, however, the government constructed a very different narrative of a faultless, comprehensive victory. Collingwood's dispatches were censored for potentially damaging or unwelcome information, and every newspaper published a story that emphasised the battle as the greatest in Britain's history, giving rise to a myth of 'total victory' that has lasted until the present day.²⁸ Nelson's funeral, organised by the government just as the news of Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz was arriving, was overtly political and propagandist from the outset. Here lay the true significance of Trafalgar; not as a decisive victory, but an event that could be deployed to enhance and sustain popular loyalism.²⁹

26 Duffy, 'All was hushed up', 226; Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 542.

27 Duffy, 'All was hushed up', 232–5.

28 *London Gazette Extraordinary*, 6 November 1805; Tim Clayton and Phil Craig, *Trafalgar: The Men, the Battle, the Storm* (London: Hodder, 2005), 351–2.

29 Timothy Jenks, 'Contesting the Hero: The Funeral of Admiral Lord Nelson', *Journal of British Studies*, 39(4) (October 2000), 422–53.

Trade and Empire

In the months after Trafalgar, the British could not prevent the French from going to sea. On 13 December 1805, less than two months after the battle, two French fleets escaped from Brest, taking the Admiralty completely by surprise. There were immediate fears for British commerce, and while naval forces were sent after both escaped fleets they sailed too late to catch them. Instead, the fleet under the French commander Leissègues sailed to the West Indies, where it was sighted rather fortuitously by a force under the command of Vice Admiral John Duckworth on 6 February 1806. Duckworth ordered an immediate attack, his force of seven ships of an even match for five French equivalents bolstered by the mighty 118-gun *Impérial*. The battle descended into a chaotic melee. The British gunnery was constant, but struggled to match the incredible broadsides of the *Impérial*; initially, the out-gunned British crews and vessels took heavy casualties and significant damage. As the battle wore on, the smaller French ships were neutralised and the British vessels were able to concentrate on the vast French *Impérial*. The combined fire finally began to tell on the French ship; with its masts badly damaged and rigging cut to pieces, it was forced ashore. The last remaining French vessel followed suit; both ships were burned by British boarding parties. The Battle of San Domingo, as it became known, saw five French ships of the line either destroyed or taken as prizes and Britain's possessions in the West Indies saved from French privations.³⁰

The second French fleet to escape, under Rear Admiral Willaumez, managed to raid British Atlantic commerce for two months. But while it could evade the Royal Navy, it could not escape the weather. In August 1806, Willaumez's fleet was devastated by a hurricane, damaging his ships so badly that they were forced to disperse and find sanctuary in a number of different friendly ports. The pursuing British fleet used every possible means to eradicate this force once and for all. One of the French ships, *Impétueux*, was attacked by a small British squadron despite being in an American port, an action of dubious legality that prompted complaints from the French consul at Norfolk, Virginia. Battered, separated and short of supplies, Willaumez's ships returned to France in dribs and drabs; by February 1807, his Atlantic campaign was over. Since leaving Brest a year earlier, his fleet had

30 William James, *A Naval History of Britain during the French Napoleonic and Revolutionary Wars* (London: Stackpole Books, 2002; first published in London between 1822–4), Vol. IV, 191–8; Sam Willis, *In the Hour of Victory: The Royal Navy at War in the Age of Nelson* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), 311–14.

done considerable harm to British trade by attacking and capturing merchantmen – one source calculates damage to Britain of at least 12 million francs. However, this isolated campaign alone could not bring down the British Atlantic commercial system.³¹

With command of the English Channel secure for the moment, there was no more important task for the navy than the protection of trade. Foreign commerce was a considerable source of income for the state, providing much-needed revenue for the war effort. The defence – and, if possible, the expansion – of trade was therefore vital to Britain's war strategy. In the West Indies, the colonies of France and its allies were gradually captured, adding rich and commercially important islands to the British Empire, further expanding its trading networks, and also removing bases from which French privateers could operate. St Lucia, Demerara, Essequibo, Berbice and Surinam were all captured in the first year of the war, a significant boost to British coffers. St Lucia, in particular, was a valuable and prosperous colony, and by 1805 its major town, Castries, was exporting 5.9 million pounds of sugar each year, as well as vast quantities of cotton, coffee, cocoa, rum and molasses. Similarly, after one year of British ownership, the former-Dutch colonies were producing more cotton for the British textile mills than all the British West Indies combined.³² Denmark's entry into the war in 1807 placed its Caribbean possessions at risk, and St Croix, St Thomas and St Johns were duly seized. In 1809, Martinique fell to the British, and the following year Guadeloupe was also taken. In both conquests, the navy played a crucial role in supplying and supporting the landings, while also erecting gun batteries on land.³³ In the aftermath, the two neighbouring islands of St Martin's and St Eustatius were captured, and the last of France's West Indian possessions had fallen.

These colonial acquisitions were conducted using local troops and naval forces, for the government was loath to commit to large expeditions sent from Britain. During the 1790s, vast expeditions had been sent to the West Indies to seize Martinique, St Lucia, Guadeloupe and Port-au-Prince, though the human costs were terrible, with over 100,000 British casualties, half of

31 Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 546.

32 J. Holland Rose, 'The Struggle with Napoleon, 1803–1815', in *The Cambridge History of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), Vol. II, 83–128; Duffy, 'World-Wide War', 192.

33 Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War*, 184; Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 556; Adkins and Adkins, *The War for All the Oceans*, 327; Roger Morriss, *Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772–1833* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 59–63; James, *Naval History*, Vol. V, 206–9.

whom died.³⁴ Only once during the Napoleonic Wars did Britain launch a major imperial expedition, that sent to seize the Cape of Good Hope in late 1805, commanded by the confident and outspoken officer Commodore Sir Home Riggs Popham. The initial attack on the Cape was very successful and the heavily outnumbered Dutch surrendered quickly. Popham then undermined his initial success by launching an attack on Spanish South America without any authority or orders from government. Numerous projectors had argued forcefully since 1803 that Britain should attempt to tap into the vast wealth of South America, but Popham was fully aware that he was surpassing his orders and directly contravening the overt policy of the British government. Popham's force captured the city of Buenos Aires, briefly sparking a mania for imperial investment when the news arrived in Britain, and forced the British government to send reinforcements. However, the subsequent campaign was a disaster: Buenos Aires was lost when its citizens rose up and forced the British troops to surrender, and Popham was eventually recalled and court-martialled (he escaped with a severe reprimand). Reinforcements briefly turned the tide in South America – Montevideo was captured later in 1806 – but the British were unable to retake Buenos Aires and the expedition ended with defeat and a full-scale evacuation.³⁵

British commercial and imperial extension was more successful in the Indian Ocean. Here the Royal Navy faced great difficulties, not least an oppressive climate, tropical diseases, a vast ocean to cruise and the inherent communication problems that came with a fleet operating so far from London. The French had considerable success using fast, predatory privateers to strike at undefended ports and weakly protected convoys. Operating out of Île Bonaparte (formerly Île Bourbon, and now Réunion) and Île de France (Mauritius), French ships, commanded by Robert Surcouf, Jacques Hamelin and Guy-Victor Duperré, proved difficult to locate and highly disruptive to East India Company trade. Only by capturing the French ports in the southern Indian Ocean could the threat be neutralised, and even here the French proved a match for their antagonists. While Île Bonaparte was captured easily in July 1810, the subsequent attack on Île de France in August was a humbling defeat for the British in which they lost four ships and over 2,000 men killed,

34 Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War against Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War*, 77.

35 James Davey, 'Atlantic Empire, European War and the Naval Expeditions to South America, 1806–07', in John McAleer and Christer Petley (eds), *The Royal Navy and the British Atlantic World, c. 1750–1820* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

wounded or captured. The Battle of Grand Port, as it would become known, was the greatest French naval victory of the Napoleonic Wars and a reminder that the Royal Navy was far from all-conquering. Today, a perceptive observer of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris will notice the battle's inclusion on the monument, a rare example of naval victory on a structure dominated by Napoleon's military successes. It was to prove a temporary setback for the British, however, and a more successful invasion of Île de France in December 1810 saw the last French privateering port fall to the British.³⁶

The following year, the last remaining Dutch possessions in the region were also taken, most notably the colony of Java, which fell to the British in 1811 after a lightning amphibious operation that took its defenders completely by surprise. By the end of 1811, every colonial possession of France and its allies was in British hands, and only one of Britain's Indian Ocean conquests, Java, would be returned in the peace of 1814–15.³⁷ The navy had won complete control of the Indian Ocean and, consequently, its riches. Not only did this help solidify Britain's imperial position in the Indian Ocean, furthering the 'swing to the East', it also saw trade to and from India and China flourish, swelling the government's coffers and providing crucial revenue that enabled Britain to continue the war at a time of financial distress. Revenue from the tea trade alone, which had stood at £1.7 million in 1803, had almost doubled to £3.2 million in 1810.³⁸ In a total war that was fast becoming a conflict between two rival economies, this trade not only kept Britain in the fight but allowed them to fund vast subsidies that kept numerous Allied armies in the field. The combined Allied offensive of 1813–14 that brought Napoleon to his knees was, in part, the result of British financial strength, which itself relied on its burgeoning maritime empire and economy.

Economic Warfare

If the war at sea aimed at the protection and extension of a protagonist's trade, it also set out to attack rival economies. This was particularly true after 1806, the year in which Napoleon Bonaparte launched his 'Continental

36 C. Northcote Parkinson, *War in the Eastern Seas, 1793–1815* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954), 412–17; James, *Naval History*, Vol. VI, 32.

37 Stephen Taylor, *Storm and Conquest: The Battle for the Indian Ocean, 1809* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 298–9, 332–3; Duffy, 'World-Wide War', 201–5.

38 R. Montgomery Martin, *The Past and Present State of the Tea Trade of England, and of the Continents of Europe and America; and a Comparison Between the Consumption, Price of, and Revenue Derived from, Tea, Coffee, Sugar, Wine, Tobacco, Spirits, &c.* (London, 1832); B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 587.

System', an ingenious solution to the chronic problem of how a land-based power like France could defeat a nation dominant at sea. As an alternative to attacking merchants themselves, he intended to remove their markets instead; Britain could have as many trading vessels as it liked, but there would be nowhere in Europe for their goods to be sold. Napoleon's unrivalled dominance of the European continent – almost at its zenith in 1806 and further confirmed at the Treaty of Tilsit the following year – enabled him to attack British commerce in a wholly novel way. All ports within Napoleon's, and his allies', territories were prevented from trading with Britain, at a stroke removing Britain's most important export market. Napoleon expected to create a balance-of-payments deficit and an extensive outflow of specie that would ultimately reduce and destroy British wealth and manufacturing. He also aimed to weaken the British economy by depriving it of certain critical commodities, not least the crucial supplies of naval stores from the Baltic, and wheat from the continent. 'I will conquer the sea through the power of the land', he explained to his brother in December 1806.³⁹

Britain's immediate response to the Continental System was to reply in kind with its own blockade, this one designed along more traditional lines. A series of Orders in Council in 1807 tightened the naval blockade of France and forced neutral vessels to call at a British port before proceeding to the continent. At a stroke, neutral trade was all but extinguished, for either a merchantman stopped at a British port, in which case it was liable for seizure in French-controlled territory, or it avoided British ports, in which case it could be captured at sea by the Royal Navy. While neutrals suffered, Britain's approach to other European nations under Napoleon's rule was subtly canny. For many, particularly those reliant on maritime trade in northern Europe, the Continental System was potentially destructive, undermining the livelihoods of great sectors of their populations. The British therefore decided upon a form of blockade that would allow merchants of any nationality to trade with Britain under the protection and control of the Royal Navy.⁴⁰ Across Europe, the Royal Navy began to organise an illicit trade to and from the continent – using neutral flags, smugglers, false papers

39 Lance E. Davis and Stanley L. Engerman, *Naval Blockades in Peace and War: An Economic History since 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 30, 38. For the Napoleon quote, see Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon the Great* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 135–7.

40 A. N. Ryan, 'Trade with the Enemy in the Scandinavian and Baltic Ports during the Napoleonic War: For and Against', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, 12 (1962), 127.

and corrupt officials – based on the simple reality that the mercantile community of northern Europe was determined to continue trading regardless of Napoleon's edicts. The war in Europe became a conflict between Napoleon's customs officials on one side and the Royal Navy and local smugglers on the other.

Towards the periphery of Napoleon's Empire, it was easy to undermine the Continental System. Merchants took advantage of corrupt and poorly paid officials to ensure that British produce entered Europe. French customs officials were paid 500 francs a year, hardly more than an unskilled worker, and they proved very susceptible to the gifts of merchants. In 1809 alone, Britain exported over £10 million of goods to southern Europe, almost four times as much as it had done in 1806, and more than had been exported in the peacetime year of 1802. Similarly, imports from the region doubled from £2.3 million in 1806 to £5 million in 1810.⁴¹ It was in the Baltic, though, that the Continental System was most effectively undermined. Here James Saumarez commanded the naval fleet, watching the Russian, Danish and German ports and attacking any warships and privateers that emerged. Alongside this, vast convoys of merchant ships numbering in the hundreds were organised by the Admiralty, Lloyd's and Saumarez to ensure that British trade continued to enter and leave northern Europe in spite of Napoleon's edicts. An entrepôt was created at Gothenburg for 'the Admission of all British Productions, colonial or manufactures', which allowed British goods quietly to enter western Sweden. As the British became bolder, naval convoys transported vessels to a point 50 miles beyond the island of Bornholm and then released them before they came within range of enemy shore batteries. Return convoys gathered initially at Karlskrona, and later at Hanö, at the southern tip of Sweden, before being escorted back to Britain.⁴²

Despite the frequent attacks of Danish gun boats as convoys entered and left the Baltic – and on one occasion the emergence of a hostile Russian fleet – in 1809 British exports to northern Europe amounted to £13.6 million, more than in any year since 1802. This was an impressive figure, given that most of the region was technically at war with Britain, and the following year thousands more convoyed ships continued to enter the Baltic.⁴³ Indeed, the

41 Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics*, 495.

42 See A. N. Ryan, 'The Defence of British Trade in the Baltic 1807–13', *English Historical Review*, 74 (1959); Tim Voelcker, *Admiral Saumarez versus Napoleon: The Baltic 1807–12* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008); Alfred W. Crosby, *America, Russia, Hemp, and Napoleon: American Trade with Russia and the Baltic, 1783–1812* (Ohio University State Press, 1965), 117–18, 142–3.

43 Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics*, 495.

navy's ability to undermine the Continental System caused a permanent breakdown in relations between France and Russia. Napoleon grew furious with Russia's lukewarm implementation of the Continental System, and in 1810 he enacted a series of decrees prescribing the destruction of all British commerce on the continent and increasing the numbers of customs officials. This hit Russia particularly hard, for during the second half of the eighteenth century Britain had become Russia's most lucrative trading partner, receiving the vast majority of its hemp, flax and iron. Russia probably suffered more under the Continental System than any other nation, and the economic downturn affected all sectors of Russian society. Customs revenue fell dramatically and there followed a general collapse in business.⁴⁴ As the Russian economy went into severe decline, Tsar Alexander began to reconsider his alliance with France. Late in 1811, Alexander opened up his ports to Britain and, in June 1812, an infuriated Napoleon declared war on Russia, and marched the *Grande Armée* towards Moscow. It would prove his undoing.

Elsewhere, naval blockade would have a telling effect. In 1812, America declared war on Britain, hoping to take advantage of British attention focused firmly on the European continent. The War of 1812 would stretch the Royal Navy to its limits, and an initial attempt to organise a full blockade of the American coastline foundered due to lack of resources. By 1813, however, naval forces off America had been reinforced and, with the British establishing a firmer blockade on the eastern coast, the war began to look bleak for the United States of America. By the end of 1813, the nation's finances had also begun to disintegrate as the British naval blockade took effect. There were gluts and shortages across the United States' economy as prices rose and state revenues fell dramatically. American exports, which had reached \$61.3 million in 1811, plunged to \$6.9 million in 1814, while imports fell from \$53.4 to \$13 million in the same period. American shipping was devastated and customs revenue fell from \$13.3 million in 1811 to a mere \$6 million in 1814. By the summer of 1814, Madison's government was struggling to raise new loans to cover this shortfall; the federal government was effectively bankrupt. In the face of overwhelming naval and economic strength, and with the prospect of further military reinforcements arriving

44 Herbert Kaplan, *Russian Overseas Commerce with Great Britain during the Reign of Catherine II* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1995), 51; M. S. Anderson, 'The Continental System and Russo-British Relations during the Napoleonic Wars', in K. Bourne and D. C. Watt (eds), *Studies in International History: Essays Presented to W. Norton Medlicott, Stevenson Professor of International History in the University of London* (London: Longmans, 1967), 77; Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars: An International History, 1803–1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 434.

from Europe, by mid-1814 the United States' government abandoned all of its war aims in exchange for peace.⁴⁵

Amphibious Operations and Naval Raids

The conflict on the European continent remained the most important theatre in the war. In Spain, the revolt against French rule was supported by a determined army under the command of Sir Arthur Wellesley. In the latter case, with the navy dominating the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Bay of Biscay, the Royal Navy was in a perfect position to utilise sea power and assist the army. Early in the war it assisted in the defence of Lisbon and Cadiz, both of which were under siege by French armies. As he marched inland, Wellesley – now ennobled as Viscount Wellington after his success at Talavera – could rely entirely on food and munitions brought from Britain by sea, allowing him to pursue a scorched-earth policy as he withdrew to Lisbon. In contrast, the French were forced to depend on vast supply trains stretching hundreds of miles across Spain, all of which were subject to attacks by guerrillas, and by March 1811 the French had been forced to retire across the Portuguese border. The navy also launched a series of diversionary raids along the coastline of northern Spain that tied down thousands of troops, saw the capture of Santander and allowed Wellington to take the field at the Battle of Salamanca facing an army numerically inferior to his, something that had appeared out of the question at the beginning of the campaign. The navy, as Wellington admitted, was central to his victory. As he neared the southern French border in 1813, he stated generously: 'If anyone wishes to know the history of this war, I will tell them that it is our maritime superiority [that] gives me the power of maintaining my army while the enemy is unable to do so.'⁴⁶

The navy's command of the ocean was therefore a great advantage in the latter years of the war, but it was not something that could be taken for

45 Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 152–3, 215; Andrew Lambert, *The Challenge: Britain against America in the Naval War of 1812* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 62; Brian Arthur, *How Britain Won the War of 1812: The Royal Navy's Blockade of the United States, 1812–1815* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), 180, 200; J. C. A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 144–7.

46 Michael Duffy, 'Festering the Spanish Ulcer: The Royal Navy and the Peninsular War, 1808–1814', in Bruce A. Elleman and S. C. M. Paine, *Naval Power and Expeditionary Warfare: Peripheral Campaigns and New Theatres of Naval Warfare* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 25. For the Wellington quote, see Byam Martin to Lord Keith, 21 September 1813, r. Vesey Hamilton (ed.), *Letters and Papers of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Thos. Byam Martin*, GCB, 3 vols (London: Navy Records Society, 1898–1902), Vol. II, 409.

granted. Even after Trafalgar, Britain was forced into a series of raids to undermine French shipbuilding efforts and also to prevent it securing the ready-made navies of neutral nations. In 1807, Britain launched a pre-emptive strike on Denmark to ensure its fleet did not fall into Napoleon's hands. The British Foreign Secretary, George Canning, justified the operation on grounds of national necessity, doing all he could to paint the Danes as aggressors. The Danes had complained vigorously about the 1807 Orders in Council, and he had little faith in the Danes' ability to resist French military advances. Constrained by time, and convinced of Danish hostility, he overlooked conflicting evidence and cared little that the pre-emptive attack had no precedent in international law; in a war of national survival, the rights of neutral nations were swept away. The Royal Navy quickly encircled the island of Zealand, isolating the small Danish army of 13,000 men and preventing any further reinforcements from arriving. The British forces then began a heavy bombardment of Copenhagen that lasted three days, killing over 200 civilians; it was one of the most shameful incidents in British military history. Shocked and overwhelmed by this brutal attack, on 5 September the city agreed an armistice, and finally capitulated on 7 September. Seventeen Danish ships of the line were confiscated, two 64-gun ships and fifteen frigates, along with naval stores worth £305,665. Many in Britain, including George III, were disgusted by the attack, and argued strongly that the operation was of dubious legality.⁴⁷

The Copenhagen expedition of 1807 had shown that Britain was not afraid to move speedily, and ruthlessly, to oppose Napoleon's naval ambitions. Unperturbed by this setback, Napoleon turned his attention to Portugal, which also had a large navy. On 12 October he ordered an army of 25,000 under General Junot to invade Portugal, but it took a considerable time to arrive, not reaching Lisbon until 30 November. The delay provided an opportunity for the Royal Navy to impede Napoleon's plans once again. A fleet was sent under the command of Sir Sidney Smith. For days, Smith waited with his force outside Lisbon, in which time he attempted to scare the Portuguese into submission, threatening them with the same 'scenes of horror' that had recently seen Copenhagen attacked. Ultimately these threats were unnecessary, for the advancing French army forced Portugal's hand. With the French forces on the outskirts of the city, on the morning of 29 November a fleet of eight ships of the line, four frigates and a number

47 A. N. Ryan, 'The Causes of the British Attack on Copenhagen in 1807', *The English Historical Review*, 68(266) (1953), 42–3, 50–1, 55–6; Thomas Munch-Petersen, *Defying Napoleon: How Britain Bombarded Copenhagen and Seized the Danish Fleet in 1807* (Stroud: Sutton, 2007), 193–209; Knight, *Britain against Napoleon*, 202, 306.

of smaller vessels emerged from the Tagus. On board was the Portuguese royal family, along with the contents of the Treasury, the bureaucratic infrastructure of the Portuguese state and around 15,000 inhabitants, all desperate to escape the oncoming French.⁴⁸ At Copenhagen and off the Tagus, the British had prevented Napoleon from seizing twenty-five ships of the line, enough vessels to drastically change the terms of the naval war.

Ever concerned with French shipbuilding efforts, the Royal Navy kept a close eye on a number of dockyard ports, on occasion launching pre-emptive attacks to ensure construction was halted or destroyed. In April 1809, Captain Thomas Cochrane launched an audacious fireship attack on the French fleet at the Basque Roads which saw four French ships of the line destroyed. There were some ports that the British could not attack: the major French ports at Toulon and Brest were too well fortified for a naval attack. In the Channel and Mediterranean, naval strategy focused on preventing the French fleets from escaping port, and also prevented the import of naval stores necessary for the expansion of their blockaded battlefleet, virtually all of which came by sea. On 1 May 1811, for instance, store ships and a merchantman laden with shipbuilding timber for Toulon, were attacked and destroyed by a small Royal Navy squadron while taking shelter in the Corsican port of Sagone. The French were far from a defeated foe. On 9 March 1812, a squadron under Allemand escaped from Lorient, hoping to intercept a British East India convoy; though he did not capture any ships, and was forced to return to Brest in a storm.⁴⁹ It was another reminder, however, that British naval supremacy was never assured.

The French also continued to pose a threat in the Adriatic. By late 1810, Napoleon's naval force in the Adriatic was superior to the small squadron of British ships stationed there in size and firepower, and Napoleon appointed one of his best commanders, Bernard Dubourdieu, to take charge of the Adriatic squadron. Facing him was the naval squadron under William Hoste, based at Lissa, with the frigates *Amphion*, *Active* and *Cerebus*, and the sloop *Acron*. Throughout the winter of 1810–11 there were a series of skirmishes between the two fleets. The French raided the Port St George (Lissa), creating havoc. On 12 March 1811, the two squadrons met off the island of Lissa. Dubourdieu's approach in two divisions was foiled by the close formation and ferocious fire of

48 Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, 322–4, 331; Martin Robson, *Britain, Portugal and South America in the Napoleonic Wars: Alliances and Diplomacy in Economic Maritime Conflict* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 143–57, 168; Robson, *A History of the Royal Navy*, 167.

49 Richard Woodman, *The Victory of Seapower: Winning the Napoleonic War 1806–1814* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998), 167; Kevin D. McCranie, *Admiral Lord Keith and the Naval War against Napoleon* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 149–53.

the British ships, and the French commander was killed as his vessel, *Favourite*, was swept by a howitzer. The Battle of Lissa was a further blow to the morale of the French navy. The British had suffered forty-five killed and 145 wounded, including Hoste himself, who was hit by a musket ball in the arm. The French by contrast had suffered around 700 killed and wounded and lost three ships. Despite the defeat, the French continued to contest the Adriatic and in 1811 a new 74-gun ship, *Rivoli*, was launched at Venice, subsequently defeated by the British 74-gun ship *Victorious* on 21 February 1812. Following the defeat of the *Rivoli*, naval forces in the Adriatic under Rear Admiral Fremantle went about mopping up isolated French garrisons, and by February 1814 he was able to claim that every French post had been reduced. French naval power in the Adriatic had been utterly broken.⁵⁰

To the west, the British Mediterranean fleet continued its unending task of watching the enemy fleet in Toulon, now amounting to twenty-one ships of the line facing a British blockading force of nineteen equivalents. On numerous occasions, the French would stand out before scuttling back into harbour at the first sign of opposition. Abraham Crawford was employed on the inshore squadron:

the enemy's fleet, though rarely venturing a league from the land, whenever the wind was easterly, seldom lost the opportunity of getting under weigh, and coming out of harbour for the purpose of exercising the crews. Some of the boldest now and then stretched beyond the limit to which they usually restricted themselves; but whenever they showed themselves so hardy, they were instantly driven back by our advanced ships.⁵¹

It was not until November 1813 that France made a last-ditch attempt to avert the course of the naval war, when between twelve and fourteen ships of the line left port with a favourable wind and came up against the inshore squadron of Vice Admiral Sir Edward Pellew's fleet, frantically returning to port as several larger British units appeared. Months later, in February 1814, Pellew again chased a French fleet back into Toulon coming close enough to exchange fire before the French once again found safety of Toulon.⁵² It was to be the last major naval action of the conflict.

50 Woodman, *Victory of Seapower*, 172–4, 178–81; Adkins and Adkins, *The War for All the Oceans*, 361–2.

51 Crawford, *Reminiscences*, Vol. II, 177.

52 Stephen Taylor, *Commander: The Life and Exploits of Britain's Greatest Frigate Commander* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 229.

British naval supremacy was neither predetermined nor guaranteed, but instead rested on constant vigilance. While Trafalgar presented Britain with a symbolic victory, the war at sea continued in earnest, requiring the constant vigilance of naval forces stationed around the world. If anything, it was in the ten years after Trafalgar that the maritime conflict made the biggest impact on the course of the war. The war at sea was not merely a back-drop to events on land. As the other contributors to this volume have shown, Napoleon's defeat in 1814 (and again in 1815) was ultimately the result of the grand alliance forged in 1813–14 and the events leading up to it, which saw defeat of his armies and the capture of Paris. However, key aspects of the Napoleonic Wars cannot be understood without the maritime context: the defeat of the Continental System; Napoleon's invasion of Russia; Britain's fiscal-military state; the financing of the various alliances that opposed Napoleon and the Peninsular War. Naval warfare played a crucial role in halting Napoleon's aims and ambitions, limiting his expansion, confining his empire to Europe and, eventually, helping to overturn his continental hegemony. In one final moment of symbolism, in the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon abdicated and retreated westwards, first to Paris and then to Rochefort, where he hoped to find a ship to take him to America. Instead Napoleon found HMS *Bellerophon* waiting, blocking his escape. 'Wherever wood can swim, there I am sure to find this flag of England', a despondent Napoleon is reputed to have commented.⁵³ He would surrender to the naval vessel, in the process yielding to the element that had offered the most constant and effective opposition to his mastery of the European continent.

⁵³ John Gibson Lockhart, *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1851), 384.