



English cultural reflections of Chatham

mirrored by similar military feats in British naval history

There is a biting irony that the year which saw the Dutch descent on the Thames and Medway, also saw the publication of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a verse epic read by some as a reflection on the Civil Wars, as well as on the folly of kings and their servants.

Mocking the misrule of kings and politicians

Milton's work had its antecedence in the period which encompassed the First Anglo Dutch War (1652–1654); its contemplation of the nature of the rise and fall of those in who serve the Divine would have resonated with many in June 1667. Another republican, Andrew Marvell, would satirise both the attack and the subsequent enquiry into the failures of 1667 in *Last instruction to a Painter*¹ It is not unsurprising that republicans would seek to condemn the folly and misrule of kings. Even the king's own servants, embodied in Samuel Pepys, Clerk of the Acts to the Navy Board, the organisation which looked after the building of ships and the administration of the dockyards, was not above sniping at the king and his court, albeit from the relative security of his diary. He wrote in cipher on 20 June² concerning Admiral George Monck, instructed by Charles II to take charge at Chatham after the Dutch fleet was sighted at Sheerness on the 19 June:

*'Yet I do not find the Duke of Albemarle intends to go thither, but stays here to-night, and hath, though the Dutch are gone, ordered our frigates to be brought to a line between the two blockhouses; which I took then to be a ridiculous thing.'*³

In the same entry he also bemoaned the lack of credit and the unwillingness of those whom he had approached for naval stores and vessels to be taken up as fireships. This was a consequence of the parliamentary money voted for the navy in 1664 having run out, as well as criticism of money wasted and creditors deceived:

*'Yet partly ourselves, being used to be idle and in despair, and partly people that have been used to be deceived by us as to money, won't believe us; and we know not, though we have it, how almost to promise it; and our wants such, and men out of the way, that it is an admirable thing to consider how much the King suffers, and how necessary it is in a State to keep the King's service always in a good posture and credit.'*⁴

He continued this diatribe on 22 June:

'O God help us! and God knows what disorders we may fall into, and whether any violence on this office, or perhaps some severity on our persons, as being reckoned by the silly people, or perhaps may, by policy of State, be thought fit to be condemned by the King and Duke of York, and so put to trouble;

The death of Nelson is here depicted in the same manner as in Benjamin's West's Death of Wolfe, cradled Christ-like, a motif repeated by West in the Nelson Pediment at Greenwich Hospital. (Source: Wikipedia.org)

*though, God knows! I have, in my own person, done my full duty, I am sure. So having with much ado finished my business at the office, I home to consider with my father and wife of things, and then to supper and to bed with a heavy heart.'*⁵

Pepys always thought about himself. In his diary entry of 21 June he recorded that on hearing the news of the Dutch attack he called in his quarter salary (Navy Board officials were paid quarterly in cash), and with that £400 sterling, plus other monies he had totalling £1,000 (equivalent to £220,388 in 2017), he fled to his father's home in the country where he buried his fortune in the garden for safe-keeping. John Evelyn, diarist and Commissioner for Sick and Wounded Seamen, also noted the fragility of popular sentiment at the time of the Dutch raid and its immediate aftermath:

*'The alarme was so greate that it put both Country and City into a paniq feare and consternation, such as I hope as I shall never see more; every body was flying, none knew why or whither.'*⁶

The Nine Years' War and its implications

This captured the spirit of the time as well as, if not better than Pepys. What came after this time of panic and shame was not the inevitable and inexorable rise to pre-eminence of the Royal Navy. Indeed, how it was celebrated or castigated reflects what would happen in

the twenty years following the Dutch raid on the Thames and Medway. The so-called Glorious Revolution banished James II into exile and crowned Dutch William of Orange king of England. William and Mary's joint reign marked an English shift from friendship or neutrality with France to opposing Louis XIV's plans for a 'universal monarchy'. William extended the warfare season during the Nine Years' War (1688–97) and revolutionised naval strategy. Dutch naval intervention by Lieutenant-Admiral Philips van Almonde at the Battle of La Hougue in 1692 was crucial in winning allied victory. The brief but significant conjoining of the English and Dutch fleets and the re-orientation of the strategic threat from the Dutch to the French, meant new possibilities for glory or disaster. Parliament's financial control and reluctance to participate in continental warfare until it threatened the Protestant succession, territorial security and trade, required Dutch financial methods. For the first four years the navy suffered shortages of money, but Dutch bankers set up long-term loans secured to specific taxes and utilised joint stock capital to finance the Bank of England in 1694, improving naval funding. William and Mary's reign also signalled a change in the 'ownership' of the navy, with parliament assuming a consistent financial responsibility. In 1699 Charles Sergison, Clerk of the Acts, extolled naval achievements: *'wee have not only maintain'd Y^{or} Whole Roy^{al} Navy at Sea for Nine Years together, but added to it 300 Saile, great and small, 200 whereof were Built off the Stocks, the other 100 Bought'*.⁷ As a product of the Nine Year's War, tangible affirmation



The Royal Hospital for Seaman at Greenwich: founded in 1694 and a powerful symbol on the River Thames of the English view of its maritime destiny. (Source: Royal Museums Greenwich)

of the new status of the Royal Navy and English maritime trade materialised on the orders of Queen Mary, continued by William in her memory, with the founding of the Royal Hospital for Seaman at Greenwich. This was built on royal land on the site of the Palace of Placentia, birthplace of Elizabeth I. Begun in 1694, it was modelled in part on the Royal Hospital at Chelsea, founded in 1682 by Charles II, and incorporated the unfinished palace begun by Charles in the 1660s. The partly new building at Greenwich, constructed on the River Thames between Deptford and Woolwich Dockyards, delivered a powerful statement about the status of the navy in early modern England through its prominent position and magnificent architecture. The early eighteenth-century Painted Hall is an allegorical master class of allusions to Greco-Roman glories, with particular depictions of Britannia's naval triumphs from the 1588 Spanish Armada to the victories in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714).

Fighting alongside the Dutch

The Royal Navy participated in the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–1715) alongside their Dutch allies. One of the first victories of this Anglo-Dutch fleet was in October 1702, when the ships under the command of Vice-Admiral Sir George Rooke and Lieutenant-Admiral Philips van Almonde attacked the Spanish *flota* in Vigo Bay. While most of the specie, totalling £14,000 in silver - almost £3,000,000 in modern terms - had been off-loaded, the Anglo-Dutch fleet succeeded in capturing or burning fifteen French ships of the line and three Spanish ships in the harbour; a more complete victory than 1667. This victory provided an occasion for Queen Anne to celebrate, with a procession in London from St James's Palace to the nearly-completed St Paul's Cathedral, the old one having been a prominent victim of the Great Fire of 1666. She was joined by the Lords and Commons, foreign dignitaries and their families, as well as ambassadors, to highlight both the material and marital splendour that was England under Queen Anne. The irony that it was an Anglo-Dutch victory was not lost. The triumphalism of this celebration seems in retrospect excessive,

considering how early in the war the victory was gained and the English fleet's lack of success elsewhere. It was, nonetheless, fully in accord with the surge of English mercantile and colonial self-confidence emerging at the start of the eighteenth century.

Nonetheless, this self-confidence was in line with the English mercantile and colonial impetus emerging at the start of the eighteenth century. Yet, in this same year, 1702, Vice Admiral John Benbow's action in the West Indies against the French Admiral Jean du Casse off Cape Santa Marta was less than successful, leading to the court martial of a number of Benbow's captains, some of whom would eventually be condemned and shot. The disciplined and effective fighting machine which Admiral Edward Hawke and later Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson could command was still in the making.

The Royal Navy against the Spanish

Over the period 1713–1739 the Royal Navy was active in the Baltic, on a mission to protect British (after the 1707 Act of Union) interests in naval stores, as well as seeing action in the War of the Quadruple Alliance (1718–1720) against Spain in alliance with France and Austria. Four months before formal declaration of that war, Admiral George Byng⁸ won a signal victory over a Spanish Fleet off Cape Passaro, in 1718, in Sicily, an event that is emblazoned in the roll of victories in the Painted Hall Greenwich. In 1739, a conflict broke out that came to be known in Britain as the War of Jenkins' Ear, named for Robert Jenkins who had been taken by the Spanish *gardacostas* in 1731 whilst trading in the West Indies. His ear was cut off by the Spanish and sent in a preserving jar to Parliament and come to underline the barbarities (as the British saw it) of the Spanish in the West Indies and South America. Vice-Admiral Edward Vernon had boasted in Parliament that he could take the important trading post of Porto Bello – a significant node in the Spanish trade system linking the Philippines, South America, the West Indies and with mainland Spain – with just six ships, and so in 1739 he set sail with a small squadron of that

size. In a stunning victory, the British forces managed to seize the town from the Spanish. In the wake of the capture of this port, a Scottish poet James Thomson wrote the words towards a masque, *Alfred*, for Prince Fredrick, son of George II, as part of the celebrations in 1740. Whilst the masque is long forgotten, these words set to music by Thomas Arne and entitled *Rule Britannia* would become synonymous with Royal Naval and British naval triumphs thereafter.

Yet, as these words rang out in the playhouses of London, the navy was having a torrid time. Vernon's success at Porto Bello was not matched by a failed attack against Cartagena, followed by a similar disaster off Toulon in 1744, which became the subject of enquiries in Parliament and a series of courts martial for both the commanding admirals and several captains. This gloom was offset by George Anson's circumnavigation, which included the capture of a Manila galleon, *Nuestra Señora de Covadonga*, and garnered an estimated £91,000 (£20,000,000 at 2017 values) in prize money. **So large was the amount of silver that was brought back that it was paraded through the streets of London under guard of a squadron of dragoons. Anson subsequently became a celebrity which, given his taciturn nature, must have been a trial for everyone.**

The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle/Aachen of 1748 left the British and some American colonies smarting after the return to the French of Louisbourg, which had been captured in 1745 by a combined force of colonial troops and Royal Navy ships following a siege of 47 days. The British had been on the cusp of overcoming a greater barrier than the Thames or Medway in crossing the St Lawrence in late winter and early spring, and advancing to Quebec in the heart of New France. This would not come to pass for another fourteen years. Nonetheless, to celebrate the peace, the British public were royally entertained with fireworks in Green Park, London, in



Pottery: this type of pottery was mass-produced to feed public demand, showing that from the 1740s onwards the Royal Navy and its victories were celebrated by a broad cross-section of the nation. (Source: Wikipedia.org)

April 1749, accompanied by the music of Georg Friedrich Handel. The fireworks were a damp squib - it rained and one of the specially erected pavilions burnt down – the music, however, has endured.

The Royal Navy changes

At this time, in 1748, the first patent naval officers' uniform was introduced, as sea officers 'wished to be recognised as being in the service of the Crown.' This trend towards signs of distinction for sea officers marked yet another change from the divisive gentlemen and tarpaulins debate of the Stuart period, so ably discussed by J D Davies, to gentleman of the quarter deck by nature of their rank and status holding commissions under the sovereign. These officers became aspirant gentry, also seeking out society painters, such as Joshua Reynolds, as well as building country houses - if and when they gained enough prize money. The nobility and gentry in turn also sought to ape the new naval fashion, with riding coats cut to the same pattern.

These changes in the culture and significance of the Royal Navy in Britain's national consciousness would be cemented during the course of the next war, and the humiliation of the Dutch descent on the Thames and Medway in 1667 would be replaced with the myth of Royal Navy's near invincibility in battle. That things did not go well at the start is an understatement. Admiral Boscawen's action in 1755 against three French ships, two of which were *en flute*, was, as a brother officer stated, 'either too much or too little.'⁹ Either way, Britain and France would be at war again over colonial possessions later that year.

After the debacle of Byng's action off Minorca in 1756 and the political infighting that followed the loss of the island and its dockyard, it would be another three years until *Annus Mirabilis* of 1759, with the naval victories at Lagos and Quiberon Bay, the latter an example of exemplary seamanship and nerve in battle. Fought in November in a bay with a 'violent wind', a full gale from West Northwest late in the afternoon, the action started at approximately 2:30pm and continued until 5pm when darkness began to fall. The long years of warfare and 'keeping the seas' had paid off; seamanship and the willingness to take calculated risk had supplemented a culture of timorous councils of war and occasional victories.

In the following year, 1760 the composer William Boyce wrote the music used in one of the actor-manager David Garrick's pantomimes, *Harlequin's Invasion*. All but forgotten now, one of the tunes, with additional words by Garrick, became the song *Hearts of Oak*, the embodiment in popular culture of this new self-confidence in Britain's naval power. Sung at gala performances to enthusiastic audiences who joined in the chorus, it was also used to beat to quarters aboard warships in later wars of the eighteenth century and remains a central symbol today as the official march of the Royal Navy.



lions rampant, personifying the nations of England, Scotland and Ireland. The publication of Milton's *Paradise Lost* reflected the social and political turmoil at the end of the seventeenth century, and the lowest point of the Royal Navy's fortunes. *The Apotheosis of Nelson*, commissioned and erected in the first decade of the nineteenth century, quite literally signalled for all to see the transfiguration of the Royal Navy to iconic national status.

'The Apotheosis of Nelson, where the artist Benjamin West has the body of Nelson being borne up by Winged Victory, Christ-like.' In the Naval Hospital Greenwich. (commons.wikimedia.org)

The courageous deeds of Nelson

If 1667 had been a personal humiliation for Charles II and a check to the navy, then the start of the nineteenth century would see new glories with the bittersweet victory off Cape Trafalgar, and more importantly, the subsuming into the British national mythos of Admiral Lord Nelson (1758-1805). Throughout the century his deeds, and those of the navy, would be studied and worked and reworked as moral exemplar of courage and sacrifice for the service of Britain and its *alter ego*, Britannia, that would have been scarcely believable in 1667.

Nelson lay in state in the Painted Hall in Greenwich and 30,000 people flocked to see his body move from the chapel to the river, accompanied by so great a throng of people that the local militia had to be called out to control the crowds. Subsequently, Nelson would take his place on the pediment on the colonnade of the Naval Hospital Greenwich, which would embody this shift to leaders of moral and martial virtue. This was *The Apotheosis of Nelson*, where the artist Benjamin West has the body of Nelson being borne up by Winged Victory, Christ-like, to an awaiting Britannia, supported by Neptune and British

Bibliography

- Bold, J, *Greenwich: an architectural history of the Royal Hospital for Seamen and the Queen's House* (Yale University Press 2001)
- Davis, J D, *Pepys Navy: Ships, Men, Warfare 1649-1689* (Barnsley 2008)
- *Evelyn's Diary*, ed Beer, E.S. (Oxford 1959)
- *Pepys Diary*, 1667, eds Latham and Matthews, (London 1971)
- Rodger, NAM, *Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Great Britain 1649-1815* (London 2004)

Notes

- 1 Marvell, Andrew, *Last instruction to a painter* (London 1667) Marvell was a poet as well as a supporter of Parliament in the English Civil War who none the less gained employment under Charles II.
- 2 In 1667 England used the Julian Calendar and the Dutch the Gregorian: In the Julian Calendar the year starts on 25 March and was 10 days behind the Georgian Calendar in 1667 hence the differing dates.
- 3 *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 19 June, Volume VIII Ed Latham and Matthews (London 1971).
- 4 *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 19 June, Volume VIII Ed Latham and Matthews (London 1971).
- 5 *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 22 June, Volume VIII Ed Latham and Matthews (London 1971).
- 6 *The Diary of John Evelyn*, July 1667, Ed E. S. Beer (Oxford 1959).
- 7 *The Serjison Papers*, 1688-1702, Volume 89 Navy Records Society, Ed R D Merriman (London 1950).
- 8 Admiral George Byng was father of Admiral John Byng who was the only English sea officer shot for failing to do his duty and who was immortalised by Voltaire in *Candide* as the admiral shot 'pour encourager les autres'.
- 9 Mackay, R, *Admiral Hawke* (Oxford 1965) P 187.

Cornelis de Witt & his English 'friends'



'Look, here's the transom of your flagship The Royal Charles; we kept it as a trophy.'



'Isn't that Admiral De Ruyter, who planned the whole thing?'



'No! It was my brilliant brother Johan who thought it up, and I carried it out.'



'De Ruyter was sick and had to remain in the rearguard. Shall we continue?'



'Here you see the real victor of Chatham, it's me portrayed like a prince.'



'Isn't that you and your brother? Republican pride goeth before a fall.'