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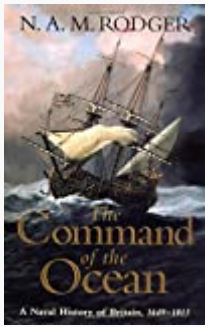
The royal sea

by William Anthony Hay

A review of *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* by N. A. M. Rodger

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BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



N. A. M. Rodger

The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815

W. W. Norton & Company, 976 pages, \$45.00

Academic scholarship often treats maritime history as a narrow subfield of military history, but several recent books indicate a renewed interest in Britain's relationship with the sea. Jeremy Black's *British Seaborne Empire* (Yale University Press) and Arthur Herman's *To Rule the Waves* (HarperCollins) each connect aspects of maritime history with broader themes. The eagerly awaited second installment of Nicholas Rodger's three-volume *Naval History of Britain* makes a worthy counterpart.

Rodger's first volume, *Safeguard of the Sea*, published in 1997, explored the impact of naval affairs on British history from 660, a period before the emergence of either an English state or a permanent navy, through the end of English Civil Wars in 1648. *Command of the Oceans* continues the story from Oliver Cromwell's regime, carrying it through the age that Patrick O'Brian and C. S. Forester depict so vividly. Rodger divides the book into chapters on operations, social history, administration, and technology that provide impressive detail without overwhelming the narrative.

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England's navy played a decisive role in the Civil War when it sided with Parliament against Charles I. Sea power proved vital in preventing a Stuart revival before 1660. Rodger shows how the navy operated as an independent political force during the interregnum with different views from the army. Cromwell devoted much effort to keeping the navy politically quiescent, and, besides appointing generals at sea whom he could trust, he used war as a means of keeping the fleet busy. Englishmen thought naval warfare could be profitable, but maintaining fleets involved ruinous expense and the navy placed even more strain on public finance than Cromwell's army. While tactics and administration improved, the overall system failed to cohere. Nonetheless, the navy made England feared abroad under Cromwell, and that became the great lesson of the 1650s.

The Stuart Restoration in 1660 combined the English Republic's navy with royalist exiles to form a new, permanent force. Although the restored monarchy had a more stable financial base than Cromwell's regime, it could not avoid the fits and starts that plagued naval operations. Few people besides professionals understood the costs involved, and justifying expenditures brought conflict with Parliament. Charles II realized that political power at home and sea power abroad both depended upon the ability to raise money. Rodger depicts him as more engaged with administration than his reputation as a shrewd but debauched king suggests. Charles and his brother James realized the potential that sea power offered, and they found a worthy servant in the diarist Samuel Pepys, whose administrative work deserves to be better known. Finances remained a limiting factor that led to defeats like the Dutch raid in 1667 that captured and burned English ships within sight of London. Nonetheless, the royalist navy proved stronger than under Cromwell even though it remained insufficient to achieve the government's ambitions.

Circumstances changed after 1688 as effective partnership between the Crown and Parliament made more resources available. The Second Hundred Years War with France that lasted until Waterloo created pressures to extend naval operations and keep fleets at sea, and sailors met the challenge by developing new tactics and technologies. Alone among navies, Britain had overseas dockyards and the capacity to maintain close blockades in the worst conditions. The Royal Navy had a more aggressive culture than its rivals, who preferred achieving and safeguarding conquests to defeating enemy ships in battle. The execution for cowardice of Admiral John Byng on his own quarterdeck in 1757 brought controversy, but it also served to encourage others, as Voltaire quipped. Willingness to take risks expanded the range of capabilities and brought sweeping victories like Quiberon Bay.

By using sea power to defeat France in the Seven Years War, William Pitt the Elder achieved in the 1750s what Cromwell and Charles had imagined but lacked resources to accomplish. By turning the old myth of sea power into a reality, he created a new kind of empire. Only unwavering political support over time could make sea power work, and the old focus on European affairs under William of Orange and the first two Georges had prevented Britain from committing fully to a naval strategy. The War of American Independence marked a setback, as old lessons were neglected, but France and Spain failed to press their advantage. Recovery came in the 1780s, and the wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France marked the apogee of British supremacy. If sea power could not defeat Napoleon directly, it prevented him from crossing the channel and then imposed economic pressures that forced the fatal confrontation with Russia and the European powers. The ability to stay at sea and sustain operations made British naval mastery possible, and it marked the real difference between 1649 and 1815 that enabled Britain to move beyond claiming theoretical sovereignty over the seas to exercise real command of the ocean.

Rather than merely providing a history of the Royal Navy, Rodger places naval affairs in their proper place within British history. He points out that describing the eighteenth-century British state without reference to naval affairs resembles “writing a novel without using the letter ‘e,’” and the point rings true. Integrating naval history into the wider story casts familiar people and events in a different perspective that provides valuable insights. Britain’s relationship with the sea shaped everything from cultural perspectives and economics to institutional development and politics.

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