

PART ONE

**Naval Leadership:  
A Voyage of Discovery**



## INTRODUCTION

# Naval Leadership in the Age of Reform and Revolution, 1700–1850

Richard Harding\* and Agustín Guimerá†

\*University of Westminster

†Instituto de Historia, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas,  
Madrid

In 1995 Rear Admiral James Goldrick called for historians of modern navies to analyse ‘much more comprehensively the multitude of technological, financial and operational issues involved in decision-making for naval development’. In doing so he called for these historians to replicate the technical mastery of the subject that he felt ‘has hitherto largely been confined to students of the age of sail’.<sup>1</sup> While this reflected the relative interest in the context of naval decision-making displayed by historians of different periods, there was one aspect in which the level of mastery was possibly reversed – that of naval leadership.

Today, leadership is one of the most contested aspects of organisational behaviour and analysis. It is a subject of intense study for psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and, to a lesser degree, historians. The academic discussions concerning definitions, sources of leadership power, its distribution and its meaning resonate far beyond these disciplines into cultural studies, other social discourses and the wider public domains of policy, politics, business and entertainment.<sup>2</sup>

---

### How to cite this book chapter:

Harding, R and Guimerá, A. 2017. Introduction: Naval Leadership in the Age of Reform and Revolution, 1700–1850. In: Harding, R and Guimerá, A (eds.). *Naval Leadership in the Atlantic World*. Pp. 3–7. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book2.a>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

Whether it is ethics, organisational efficiency and effectiveness, international relations or general social relations, the word 'leadership' is seldom far from the centre of the debate. Better, more effective, more authentic leadership is almost always presented as at least part of the answer to the problems posed. For individuals, personal development often has the sub-text of becoming leaders in one shape or another. Lack of leadership is presented as the contemporary problem, becoming a leader is the driving ambition for right-minded people and good leadership is the panacea. The process by which this term has become so embedded in Western social relations is far from being understood. Even the first steps towards this understanding are faltering in as much as the definition of leadership mutates in different contexts and societies. Like so many other terms that underpin modern social discourses, the meaning of leadership and its practice runs a gamut of interpretation, from those who insist it is a special form of activity that can only be understood by highly trained or encultured specialists to those who see its performance as little more than everyday activity in particular circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Military organisations are far from immune from this contemporary concern. Indeed, the reverse might be true – they are particularly enthralled with understanding the concept. The quality of leadership lies at the heart of their perceptions of success and failure, organisational design and the real, lived experience of the members of those forces. Challenges from the battlefield to the budget settlements have implications for the practice and theory of leadership. Thus, for the general public and military organisations there is no lack of advice or publications on the theme.

Historians have contributed their share to the outpouring of work on leadership, and naval historians have never lagged behind. In 2005, the bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar was commemorated in Britain in a public manner which no individual battle (except, perhaps, the Battle of Britain in 1940) has known in the last fifty years. Central to this was the figure of Horatio Lord Nelson (1758–1805), the great hero-leader who died at the moment of his greatest victory, which, in the public's imagination at least, saved Britain from imminent invasion by the French Emperor Napoleon. The bicentenary provided the occasion to burst many myths, including that of imminent invasion. Equally important was the chance to review the leadership of the nations and fleets that were involved in the battle. The essays, books and conference proceedings that emerged from that commemoration did a great deal to cause historians to rethink the idea of leadership in the early nineteenth-century navies. What became obvious was that far from the last word having been said on naval leadership, there were many aspects of the phenomenon that had been glossed over, encrusted with nationalist myth or lost in the passage of time.

One result of this was the convening of an international conference at the National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth, in December 2011. It brought together speakers from Spain, France and Britain to discuss naval

leadership in the period from 1700 to 1850. They explored the subject from the level of national policy to tactical command. This collection of essays emerged from that first exchange of views. They are not the proceedings of the conference. Some essays have been modified as a result of discussions and subsequent research, and another has been added as a result of lacunae that were identified at the conference. However, they do represent the balance of views, writing and interests that were evident at that gathering. They provide insights into how navies operated in a period of long-term, high-intensity global conflict. They show how important it was for navies to be integrated into the political context of their host societies. The reputation of naval officers, their contacts with political elites and how navies are deployed are subjects covered by Surreaux, Chaline, Harding and Scheybeler. At sea the admirals were usually isolated from these domestic pressures (although as the study of d'Orvilliers shows, traditional social relations were not left behind at the shoreline). These officers commanded great power in the form of the fleets they led. Their decisions could have huge consequences for the societies to which they owed allegiance. Their performances were judged by contemporaries and became part of the historical narrative of nations. The essays on Mazarredo, Suffren, Barceló, Salazar and Napier all pose different questions as to how this behaviour has been interpreted and integrated into the traditional national narratives. Here we see very different approaches to command in relation to subordinates, relations with the political masters and, crucially, in the face of the enemy.

Taken as a whole, what do these essays tell us? The essays focus on a period of major change. During the eighteenth century, navies became one of the main vehicles of geopolitical and economic strategy for European states extending their influence on a global scale. The range, robustness and impact of navies across the world expanded tremendously. Navies were very much at the forefront of the technological and organisational shifts that accompanied this phase of European expansionism. In July 1789 one of the defining events of European history occurred with the outbreak of the French Revolution. By 1792 the French naval officer corps had all but crumbled in the wake of the revolutionary upheavals and Europe was plunged into 23 years of intense, almost non-stop warfare. During this time the impact of the revolution was felt not just in Europe but in South America and the Caribbean as well. The independence and reform movements led to bloody civil wars in which navies played important, even decisive, parts. Some of these essays shed light on how states reacted to the demands of maritime and naval power before 1789. Others look at how naval commanders performed in the long wars that succeeded 1792. What they all show is that although there was a common understanding of how wars at sea should be fought, there were distinct differences between states and commanders as they had to respond to different conditions. There are clear comparisons at one level, but the contrasts are just as informative.

What they also confirm is that the concern for leadership has been with us for centuries. The twenty-first century is not breaking new ground. The practice of leadership may be different and some of the reasons for this emerge from the essays, but the problems faced by societies and nations have a great deal in common and navies as tools for solving those problems are also much the same. The 'modern' naval problem of inter-state rivalry, which is again raising its head across the world, dominated the state decision-making processes for navies in the eighteenth century. The 'post-modern' naval problems of our world, from economic security, piracy and smuggling, to maintaining good order on the maritime commons and managing alliances, had their counterparts in those eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century navies in an age of mercantilism.<sup>4</sup> These essays take us away from the well-known world of the great sea battles of annihilation that are the culmination of great power rivalry to the death, and which dominated naval thinking from the 1880s to the end of the Cold War, to the variety of naval duties and operations that occur in those long periods of naval confrontation, which range from diplomatic flag or sabre waving to police actions, and upwards to low-intensity, regional conflict. There are many more dimensions to the problem of naval leadership which need to be explored. History never repeats itself and leadership is not a universal technique or method of social control. The world is constantly changing, and as Western navies face growing regional and global challenges with fewer platforms and a greater need to work in partnership, they have, at the same time, to respond to national public perceptions of what navies do and how they do it. An understanding of how leaders behaved and how leadership was exercised is an important step in forming a better understanding of the role leadership plays in the life of navies.

This collection started as a response to the questions and debates that had been stimulated during the bicentenary commemorations of Trafalgar. Central to that year of activities was Professor Colin White. Colin dedicated much of his life to the study of Nelson and he became a great enthusiast for spreading the word about Nelson and the naval history of his times to the wider public. Apart from the energy he displayed in organising and being part of a whole range of commemorative events, he produced a new edition of Nelson's correspondence and a monograph reflecting on Nelson as an admiral.<sup>5</sup> Although a great admirer of Nelson, he did not neglect the contributions of others to the great war at sea during these years. From the common seaman to the problems faced by other navies, Colin was quick to point out they all needed to be understood. One of his characteristics was the welcome he gave to scholars of all nations to discuss and debate naval leadership of the period. His early death after becoming Director of the Royal Navy Museum Portsmouth (the precursor of the National Museum of the Royal Navy) was a sad loss to the subject. He would have been an enthusiastic contributor to these essays had he lived and it seems fitting that these essays are dedicated to his memory.

A number of debts of gratitude have been incurred during this project. First, the sponsors of the original conference made it possible. These are the National Museum of the Royal Navy, the Society for Nautical Research, the 1805 Club, La Sorbonne et Musée national de la Marine, Paris, the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, Madrid, the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid, and the Gunroom, HMSSurprise.org. We are also grateful to all the contributors for developing their papers. Finally, we are very grateful for the patience of Andrew Lockett of the University of Westminster Press, who helped us bring it all together.

