



*Ruddock Mackay & Michael Duffy, Hawke, Nelson and British Naval Leadership, 1747-1805. Boydell Press £50*

During the lead up to 2005 and the bicentenary of Trafalgar the reading public was deluged with a plethora of books about Nelson and his various battles, so that one highly respected critic was to write that he was suffering from OGNABAN – Oh God, Not Another Book About Nelson! During that whole period little was heard about anybody else of the Royal Navy, aside from Collingwood and occasionally Hardy. There was quite properly a tremendous outpouring of work about both the battle and about Nelson, and much playing of “Heart of Oaks”. Yet here we are four years later and about to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a victory at Quiberon Bay every bit as decisive as Trafalgar, and yet there are no celebrations and few people, aside from naval specialists, have heard of Edward Hawke.

Ruddock Mackay and Michael Duffy have decided to redress the balance and have succeeded brilliantly in examining the chain of naval leadership that links Hawke with Nelson, the Seven Years War with the Napoleonic War and the evolution of the British strategy of blockade. In doing so, they have pulled together a series of pen portraits of all the major fleet leaders between 1747 and 1805 and subjected them to a rigorous scrutiny under a number of quite specific criteria. These are:

- The achievement of a major victory, especially where it was conclusive for the maritime aspect of the war in question.
- Originality either in the conception, or the planning, or the execution of a successful operation.
- Seamanship, especially an ability to judge the limits of a fleet’s capability in the most difficult and testing conditions.
- A brave spirit of aggression and a cool determination, aiming at total defeat of the enemy squadron or fleet.
- Tactical flair; a sound estimate of the risks involved; an ability to surprise the enemy; and quickness in closing to a very close range, thus making best use of all the daylight available.
- Thorough planning, training and tactical preparation for action, with captains encouraged to use their initiative in furtherance of the admiral’s plan; and likewise harmonisation with the army before, and during, a combined operation.
- A well-developed grasp of strategy, both on the level of a cruise and on the broadest geographical scale, together with ability to handle the logistical and health problems involved in a major operation.
- Moral courage allied to excellent judgement, especially where a major operational risk is involved, or where an imperative need to disobey an inept or inappropriate order issued by a superior officer or some other superior authority presents itself.
- Outstanding personal leadership, enhancing the performance of the captains in battle and the morale of the fleet in general.
- Good health, and physical stamina sufficient for conducting a prolonged blockade or to complete a victory, including an unrelenting pursuit where applicable.
  - Clarity of communication and, where feasible, simplicity, both in operational planning and in the use of signals in battle.
  - A zealous concern for the effect of the commanding admiral’s conduct on the morale, effectiveness and cohesion of the service as a whole.



Nobody other than Hawke and Nelson achieve a full mark of 12 out of 12. Book-ending the work are exemplary studies of the naval careers of these two paragons, and in particular of their two finest victories: Hawke's to the far west of Lorient in 1747 and at Quiberon Bay in 1759, Nelson's at Aboukir Bay in 1798 and at Trafalgar in 1805. In both cases there is a dramatic retelling of the old story, but with a close reliance on the very latest accounts and interpretations. In between the key British admirals of the period are all analysed: Anson, Warren, Pocock, Boscawen, Saunders, Keppel, Rodney, Howe, Jervis and Duncan. Their faults and their strengths are all expertly summarised.

Equally fascinating is the examination of how the tactic of close blockade was gradually built up. It was Hawke who established a veritable stranglehold of Brest, on the hostile north-west coast of France, prior to Quiberon Bay. By keeping his battle squadron out of sight of land, but keeping a close squadron of lighter ships – frigates and sloops – close inshore, Hawke made certain that nothing could get in or out of Brest. Anybody who has sailed that coastline will know quite how treacherous it can be in anything other than a mild breeze, and to keep ships as close as Hawke insisted was a testament to the sailing abilities of the Royal Navy. It also required a major re-supply effort so that food and water (and beer) was brought out to the fleet. As a result of the demand for beer the Royal Navy constructed its own brewery at Plymouth!

When Hawke retired in 1760, dying in October 1780, he handed on a fleet at the peak of its being. However, his successors were not of the same calibre. Only a month before he died the Royal Navy engaged the French at Chesapeake Bay, and failed to defeat them, resulting, two days after his death, in the surrender of the British at Yorktown to George Washington. It took the hard discipline of Sir John Jervis, the organising ability of Cornwallis and the harsh lessons of the Revolutionary War to bring the Royal Navy back to a peak upon which Nelson could impose his genius. The rediscovery of the close blockade, and its effect on the French navy, the training imposed by Jervis, and the inspirational leadership of Nelson ensured that battles would be won, and won in crushing style.

Other admirals had won victories, but only Hawke and Nelson won decisive victories, victories that changed the course of events. Both Quiberon Bay and Aboukir Bay destroyed the enemy fleet and saw the French forced to abort their plans. While Trafalgar did not win the war against Napoleon, as some romantics would have us believe, it did mean that the French could never threaten an invasion of Britain. All three battles were fought at close range, and the authors make a special point of emphasising that this meant "pistol shot", i.e. 5 to 10 yards. At that range the better British gunnery could be, and was, decisive. Hawke could have said, as Nelson did "No captain can do very wrong if he lays his ship alongside that of an enemy." Both admirals wanted a battle where the enemy fleet was not just beaten, but annihilated.

As an example of a comparative study this book cannot be bettered. There is surely a case to be made for doing something similar with generals or admirals in the twentieth century, and establishing criteria by which they might be judged. Ruddock Mackay and Michael Duffy have set an example that many may wish to follow.