YOUNG NELSONS

Boy Sailors *during the* Napoleonic Wars

D.A.B. RONALD

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Boy Sailors during the Napoleonic Wars 1793–1815

Foreword by

ALEXANDER KENT

D.A.B. RONALD

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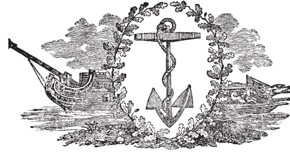

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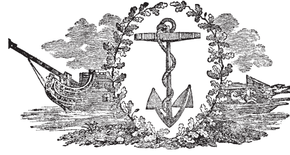

FOREWORD

by Alexander Kent

Having shadowed the footsteps of my fictional hero, Richard Bolitho, from midshipman to admiral, I found *Young Nelsons* vivid, lively and approachable. Meticulously researched, it illuminates aspects of Nelson's navy and times hitherto unrecorded: the lives and careers of those taking the first tentative steps up the uncertain ladder from 'young gentlemen' – midshipmen – and those boys, less fortunate or less privileged, whose experience was a harder beginning on the lower-deck.

Some were very young indeed. It is sobering to recall that when 'Bounty Bligh', as he was known to the end of his tempestuous life, was first packed off to sea in a disciplined ship-of-the-line, the *Monmouth*, he was seven years and nine months old. The rigours of life at sea from this tender age can without doubt have ensured that Bligh, who was by no means the tyrant of legend, had absolutely no sense of humour, which I believe contributed in no small measure to the unfortunate events for which he will forever be blamed.

I think it is worth noting, too, that when Bligh was a captain in command of his own two-decker, the *Glatton*, at Copenhagen in 1801, he was summoned aboard the flagship after the battle and commended for his performance and support. The admiral was none other than Horatio Nelson, who, incidentally, had joined his first ship aged 12 in 1771, under the auspices of his maternal uncle, Captain Maurice Suckling.

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The author of *Young Nelsons* also examines the flood of contemporary literature, particularly the work of Marryat, who wrote from a lifetime's experience at sea, and whose novels undoubtedly gave rise to modern naval fiction. Lovers of that very popular genre are already prepared for descriptions of being aloft, reefing and furling sails, or sponging out a gun in the aftermath of close action, when we read eyewitness accounts from those who were actually there.

That these voices from the past can speak to us with such clarity and immediacy can have its disadvantages, of course, requiring accuracy and experience from the novelist. My hero Richard Bolitho has a bad head for heights. I blame that on my own service at the naval training establishment HMS *Ganges*, which was dominated by a towering mast from the original vessel of that name, the last sailing line-of-battleship to serve in the Royal Navy. You were expected to climb up and over the mast, no matter what. I can still feel it!

Of all those termed 'Young Nelsons', I still consider William Hoste the best candidate for the title. He first went to sea at the age of 12 and served as an eager midshipman aboard the third-rate *Agamemnon* under the command of Captain Horatio Nelson. In his letters home, Hoste often described the encouragement and paternal interest Nelson regularly offered his midshipmen, qualities which Hoste would soon recognize as the essence of leadership by example. Hoste was always a favourite of Nelson's, described by him as 'brave, bright, and enterprising'. Praise indeed from one already regarded as one of England's heroes.

Although Nelson did not live to see it, Hoste would repay that faith in him, in 1811 at the battle of Lissa, fought in the disputed waters of the Adriatic. Captain Hoste, in command of the frigate *Amphion*, with three other similar ships, *Cerebus*, *Active*, and *Volage*, was confronted by a French-Venetian force of twice their strength, under the flag of Commodore Bernard Dubordieu. Lissa was to prove one of the last major battles fought under sail. Hoste had been well trained, and bore in mind Nelson's edict: *the best form of defence is attack*. But before he opened fire against such daunting odds, he made one more signal: *Remember Nelson*.

It was enough. For his men, and those who followed.

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Many years later a memorial was erected on Lissa, renamed Vis, at the Old Naval Cemetery, as a fitting tribute to all British sailors and soldiers who perished in the Mediterranean theatre of war. The last lines on it read:

> Life to be sure is nothing much to lose,
> But young men think it is, and we were young.

Our Nel would have approved.

A.K.

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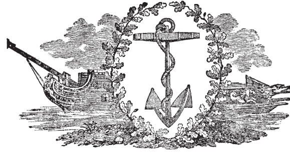

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for *Young Nelsons* has been percolating for some while. As a parent, I have been fascinated trying to understand how differently children see the adult world around them. Nothing could be more 'grown-up' than nations, races and religions at war with each other, yet all too often children find themselves, for better or worse, thrust into the thick of the resulting maelstrom. As far as I am able to deduce from the archives, an ancestor of mine entered the British Navy aged ten in the early 1800s. His trail has gone cold. Fortunately this is not so for many other 'young Nelsons'.

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, spanning the period 1793 to 1815, were, by some measures, the first 'world' wars and truly modern ones. Young boys and, indeed, girls found their voices and began articulating what they thought of the adult world around them gone mad. The story of these Wars has been told from many angles, through many lenses, but never before by the 'young gentlemen' of the quarterdeck and the 'boys' of the lower-decks. Who were these 'young gentlemen'? Who were these 'boys'? What did life at sea in a man-of-war hold for them? *Young Nelsons* is their stories, their 'Wars'.

At the same time as working on *Young Nelsons*, I have been undertaking a research thesis at the University of Exeter, a major centre of excellence for the study of maritime history. My research aims to carry on where *Young Nelsons* must leave off.

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As with all works of non-fiction, I have been dependent on the expertise and generosity of many individuals and institutions. I would like to thank the extremely helpful and knowledgeable staff at the Royal Archives, who, by permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, gave me invaluable access and guidance for my 'Royal Sailor' chapter. The archives at the London Marine Society, the Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum, the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth, the Royal Marines Museum, Southsea, the British Library, London, the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, and the library at the University of Exeter were stalwarts of my research, and I am very grateful to all of the staff at these institutions for their assistance.

From my bibliography it will be evident that I have relied on a wide range of learned works by historians and biographers. I thank them all, especially Tom Pocock, sadly recently deceased. In order to find and hold on to the original voices of the young Nelsons, I have drawn on many memoirs and collections of letters, some edited by later historians. The Navy Records Society has been especially diligent in this regard and is thanked and congratulated for its tireless efforts as a vital source of reference for me and future historians. Two reference sources stand out and deserve my special thanks: the 2003 thesis by Roland Pietsch on the early days of the London Marine Society, and the collection of Nelson letters compiled by, among others, George Naish. I am particularly grateful to my supervisors at the University of Exeter: Professor Jeremy Black, Professor Nicholas Rodger and Professor Gerald MacLean for their support and guidance throughout on my thesis. Last, but certainly not least, my thanks go to my commissioning editors, Ruth Sheppard and Jaqueline Mitchell and their colleagues at Osprey Publishing for working with me on this project.

On a personal note, my heartfelt thanks and love go to my wife, Susan, who has inspired and helped nurture this endeavour, listening with me each day for the patter of tiny feet echoing along the decks of Britain's 'wooden walls' from two centuries ago and waiting with bated breath as one young Nelson after another has struggled to find his voice.

My one regret is that my father, Colonel David Bruce Ronald CBE, and my mother, Elizabeth, did not live to see *Young Nelsons* in its final form. *Young Nelsons* is dedicated to my father's memory thanking him for who he was. I already have a second project in progress and the resulting book will be dedicated to my dear mother.

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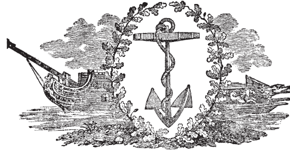

PROLOGUE

They 'behaved like young Nelsons',[1] Thomas Dalrymple, a schoolmaster, had noted, writing from aboard the *Mars* after the Battle of Trafalgar. His words bore witness to the skill and valour of his classroom charges in the heat of battle, and, by likening them to the nation's greatest naval hero, Dalrymple was paying them the highest compliment imaginable.

Yet there was one of Dalrymple's young pupils, 13-year-old Norwich Duff, who stood out for his bravery long after the cannons had fallen silent that day. Following the 'Great Battle' at Trafalgar, young Norwich had the painful duty of writing to his mother waiting back home in Edinburgh for news that all was well. He was safe and sound but, sadly, he must report the death of the captain of the *Mars* – his father, her husband. Struggling for words, Norwich described to 'my dear Mamma' how 'dear papa … died like a hero having gallantly led his Ship into Action'.[2]

Surprisingly to us today, Norwich was one among hundreds of 'young Nelsons' in the fleet of 27 British warships forming in line to confront the combined fleet of France and Spain on 21 October 1805. 'Tomorrow, I will do that which will give you young gentlemen something to talk and think about for the rest of your lives',[3] Nelson had told a group of midshipmen with him aboard HMS *Victory* ahead of the Great Battle. Indeed, across the horizon wherever Britain's navy was on patrol around the globe, there were yet more young Nelsons, some no more than ten years old, who had joined the British Navy in the years leading up to and following the declaration of war by France in February 1793. To be in on the Great Battle, whenever and wherever it happened, was what these

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youngsters had been striving for all those years, and to have missed out was too cruel. Writing home soon after hearing news of the victory, William Hoste, who had first gone to sea in 1793 aged 12, and whose ship, the *Amphion*, had been ordered away from the fleet by Nelson only days before the Great Battle, would ruefully remark: 'Not to have been in it is enough to make one mad.'[4]

Who were these youngsters and why were they so 'mad' for battle? To answer those and other questions about a whole generation of Britain's youth, we must begin their story long before the Battle of Trafalgar, before even the start of the Wars.

For one young gentleman, as his friend Bat James recalled, the story started as he lay fast asleep one cold winter's morning as 1767 turned into 1768:

> Never shall I forget, O my friend and old messmate, Richard Marsinghall, thy good old mother's joy at communicating the news of her success to thee, nor can I help smiling at the flattering picture she drew of thy situation when she awoke thee on that day before thy usual hour.
>
> 'Richard,' said she, 'my dear son Richard, get up, thou art made for ever.'
>
> 'What am I made, Mother?' replied my friend Marsinghall, in the utmost surprise and astonishment.
>
> 'Oh,' said she, 'Richard, my tender life, thou art made a midshipman…'[5]

If Richard's mother were to be believed, all he had to do was haul himself up, slip into one of 'the most fashionable midshipmen's uniforms'[6] that she had had made up specially, have himself royally conveyed by carriage down to the harbour at nearby Torbay, strut on board some mighty ship-of-the-line waiting to do his bidding and, in the twinkling of his mother's eye, he was 'made for ever'. Nothing could be simpler to the boy's mind. No matter that the Marsinghalls were not a naval family, nor that Richard was just one of a 'great many youngsters who had never before been to sea.'[7] Mother Marsinghall had said he was 'made for ever', and mothers were there to be trusted.

What blind faith. Would that Mother Marsinghall had read about young Tom Bowling, in Tobias Smollett's immensely popular *Adventures of Roderick Random*, venturing on the high seas back in the 1740s, or seen a production of Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 2* portraying ship-boys at sea from an even earlier time:

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> Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
> Seal up the ship-boy's eyes and rock his brains
> In cradle of the rude imperious surge,
> And in the visitation of the winds,
> Who take the ruffian billows by the top,
> Curling their monstrous heads and hanging them
> With deaf'ning clamour in the slippery clouds,
> That, with the hurly, death itself awakes?[8]

Surely, reading these, Mother Marsinghall would have thought twice and even if, unbelieving of novelists and playwrights and preferring facts to fiction, she could have imbibed the true histories of all those 'younkers' described in Hakluyt's 1600 *Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation* ranging across the globe in Sir Francis Drake's shadow. If she were minded to, she could even have tracked back into ships' records in the 1300s, where as many as one in eight of a ship's complement might be boys.[9] With the legacy of Britain's great naval tradition to draw on, it was inconceivable that Mother Marsinghall had no 'apprehension of the dangers that attend the profession'[10] of a mariner. So why did she, like so many mothers before and after her, risk her son at sea? Again, the answer to this starts long before the Wars, all the way back to the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, when Britain began its first tentative steps in search of empire and boys began to reach out from the pages of history.

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'YOUNKERS IN THE TOP CONTINUALLY'

Hakluyt compiled his great work of English naval history over many years, finally completing it in 1600. Drawing on many sources, including eyewitness accounts, he recorded the great 'voiages' of the period, including one that, by 26 November 1578, had brought its explorers to the shores of the Island of Mocha deep in the South Pacific. There, a drama unfolded:

> The general himself was shot in the face, under his right eye, and close by his nose, the arrow piercing a marvellous way under the *basis cerebri,* with no small danger of his life; besides that he was grievously wounded in the head. The rest, being nine persons in the boat, were deadly wounded in divers parts of their bodies, if God almost miraculously had not given cure to the same. For our chief surgeon being dead, and the other absent by the loss of our vice-admiral, and having none left us but a boy, whose good will was more than any skill he had, we were little better than altogether destitute of such cunnings and helps, as so grievous a state of so many wounded bodies did require.[1]

A tale of bows and arrows. A far-off island few have heard of. A general dangerously wounded; nine others injured, at death's door; the surgeon dead. Their fate in the hands of 'a boy'. Surely no 'Great Battle' this. True, but, given that the 'general' who came within a whisker of death was Francis Drake, it was nevertheless a seminal moment. By the time of his encounter with the

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tribe of Araucanians on Mocha Island, Drake had safely navigated through the treacherous waters of Magellan's Strait and, blown off course, discovered the southernmost point of the Americas by accident. No mean feats, but mere trifles compared to what lay ahead for him and his crew, among them 'younkers', as boys serving on ships were often called in those days. Drake had not yet decided that the only route home lay westwards out across the vast Pacific, leading him, perforce, to circumnavigate the globe. He would achieve this momentous task over the next two years, arriving home in September 1580. Nor had he led the English Navy to its ultimate trial of strength with the mighty Spanish empire. This would happen in the coming years, culminating in the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. This victory would establish England as a maritime power to be reckoned with in the race to carve up the known world: an ever-present threat to the established empires of newly united Spain and Portugal, and fast rival to the other upstart empire-builders, Holland and France.

The foundations for England's so-called 'wooden walls', laid down earlier by Henry VIII and nurtured by his daughter Elizabeth I, would creak at times during the coming centuries, but in 1588 a line had been drawn in the sand by a fleet of 54 English sails ranged along the English Channel. So far, no further, the cry rang out. And for every Englishman, the hero was Drake, scourge of the Spanish Main, greatest mariner of his time and heroic embodiment of the English Crown's swashbuckling ambitions. From behind this line in the sand, England would increasingly project its imperial destiny, culminating with seeming inevitability in the Battle of Trafalgar 217 years on, after which date Britain really could claim to 'rule the waves'.

Yet in 1578, on the shores of the Island of Mocha, for one brief moment Drake's destiny was in the hands of a mere youngster, 'a boy, whose good will was more than any skill he had'. Hardly what Drake needed at this critical moment. No young hero this boy. No fight, no skill; just bags of goodwill. Fortunately for Drake, or so Hakluyt's eyewitness reassured his readers, there were other, more powerful, more reliable forces at work and 'God by the good advice of our general, and the diligent putting to of every man's help, did give such speedy and wonderful cure, that we all had great comfort thereby, and yielded God the glory thereof'.[2]

When, by contrast, Thomas Dalrymple reported all those years later on the exploits of his pupils at the Battle of Trafalgar, there was no mention of divine

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intervention. Why should he? All around him, for months on end, Thomas had witnessed the discipline, training and expert seamanship that was Britain's now well-honed naval fighting machine. Add a healthy dose of bravery and valour on the day of battle, and victory was the only possible outcome. They 'behaved like young Nelsons'. These were no empty words, soothing balm to ease the suffering of a grieving widow. Thomas meant them, as only survivors of a titanic life and death struggle could mean them. And, more telling, his words embraced not only Mrs Duff's son, Norwich, but all the young gentlemen aboard the *Mars* that day. No cowards here; one and all were cut from the same cloth.

And they had names. Not so the boy on Mocha Island, nor the other two boys listed among the '164 able and sufficient men'[3] on the five ships that started out on this expedition in 1577. Their anonymity is no surprise, but at least these three made it into the official records. There would almost certainly have been more boys on the five-ship expedition. A ship's complement in the time of Henry VIII allowed for between one and five boys per vessel depending on the rate (size) of the ship. 'Boys' had been an official naval crew classification on Crown vessels since the 1200s, when Exchequer Pipe Rolls gave standard rates of pay for various grades of sailors as 6d per day for masters and constables, 3d per day for sailors and 1½d for 'boys'. However, come the 1582 Scale of Sea Pay and Complements, 'boys' had already disappeared as a separate classification and may have been subsumed into other titles such as 'Yeoman's Mate', 'Steward's Mate', 'Carpenter's Mate' or 'Swabber'. Additionally, boys often came on board ship as apprentices to learn a specific trade. The fact that they were at sea rather than on land was incidental. 'Boys' only reappeared in the 1626 Scale of Pay and Complements, by which time they were earning 7s 6d for a 28-day month.[4]

Whatever the exact number of boys on the Famous Voyage of Circumnavigation, they were starting out young, just as Drake had done. By the age of eight Drake was already afloat, albeit living in a hulk moored in the River Medway. By the age of ten, if not earlier, he was at sea proper, his father having placed him 'with a neighbouring pilot, who, by daily exercise, exercised him to the sailor's labour with a little bark, wherewith he sailed up and down the coast, guided ships in and out of harbours, and sometimes transported merchandise into France and Zeeland.'[5] Still only in his teens, Drake became proud owner of the bark, having fallen heir to it on the master's death. By age 20 he was voyaging to the Guinea coast, having

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teamed up with the other great mariner of the age, his distant cousin John Hawkyns, working the slave routes.

Records from an unlikely source, the Spanish Inquisition, show that younkers also took other roles on board ship. In one account sent back to Madrid by the Portuguese pilot Nuno da Silva, one of the prisoners captured by the English during Drake's Famous Voyage, we hear how 'Francis Drake kept a book in which he entered his navigation and in which he delineated birds, trees and sealions. He is adept in painting and has with him a boy … who is a great painter.'[6] Another account by Don Francisco De Zarate, a Spanish aristocrat who joined Drake and his crew on the *Golden Hind* in prayers, mealtimes and evenings of entertainment, reveals how the evening ended with a pageboy entertaining the ship's company by dancing 'in the English fashion'.[7] However, Zarate soon moves on to the more sinister purpose of his account: 'He also carries with him painters [mapmakers] who paint for him pictures of the coast in its exact colours. This I was most grieved to see, for each thing is so naturally depicted that no one who guides him according to these paintings can possibly go astray.'[8]

By noting every headland, every bay, every shoreline along these distant coasts, these 'painters', so detested by the Spaniards, were recording a maritime world known until then only to the Spanish and, maybe, the Portuguese. And it was another cousin of Francis Drake, John Drake, who filled this position on the Famous Voyage. Aged 15 at the time of the Voyage, John had already been at sea with his cousin for at least two years. The records of an expedition to Ireland in 1575 financed by Walter Devereux, Earl of Essex, list John in the crew of his cousin's ship, the frigate *Falcon*. This expedition was no gentle cruise easing young John into the ways of life at sea. The orders from Essex were to destroy the Scottish galleys marauding in the waters between Scotland and the north Irish coast. Exceeding these orders, the expedition landed on the Scottish stronghold of Rathlin Island, off County Antrim, rounded up hundreds of Scots who had surrendered in the besieged castle or were in hiding around the island and systematically slaughtered every man, woman and child. What, if anything, John witnessed of these atrocities has been left unrecorded.

After his exploits on the Famous Voyage, advancement came quickly for John, as cousin of the greatest mariner of his time. In 1581 Sir Francis Drake was organizing an expedition to the East Indies via the Cape of Good Hope and

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appointed John, still only 20, captain of the 40-ton *Bark Francis*, one of the fleet ships. Obliged by domestic politics to remain in England, Sir Francis made Edward Fenton, a soldier of fortune with no maritime expertise, Admiral of the Fleet. At sea, tensions soon erupted between the 'mariners', with John as their ringleader, and the 'soldiers' in the expedition. The mariners wanted to go in search of Spaniards and plunder, but Fenton's instructions from the Muscovy Company, chief backers of the expedition, were to eschew any confrontations. Reaching the coast of South America and remembering how easy and rich the pickings had been playing at 15-year-old pirate alongside his older cousin on the Famous Voyage, John deserted, taking the *Bark Francis* south towards Cape Horn in search of his precious plunder.

Heaping incompetence on indiscipline, if not mutiny, John would soon learn the harsh lesson of the sea: there were no short-cuts for a master mariner. As ship's mapmaker on the *Golden Hind*, he may have digested the theory of navigation, but had he mastered the practical skills of ship-handling? With one eye, maybe, on the lessons to be learnt from the mixed fortunes of England's mariners in the reign of Elizabeth I, Captain John Foxe, writing two generations later, would deride what he called 'Mathematicall sea-men'[9] instead praising the 'painefull Seaman … who must be taught to practice by long and industrious use'[10] and was not 'a good Sea-man that hath not undergone the most Offices about a Ship, and that hath not in his youth bin both taught and inured to all labours'.[11] John was now to realize his shortcomings as a 'good Sea-man' for, en route to Cape Horn, the *Bark Francis* was shipwrecked off the River Plate. Struggling ashore, many of the crew were promptly killed by the local Indians. John should have died then. Instead, the Spaniards captured him. Once they discovered his name, his fate was sealed.

Despite Sir Francis Drake's abhorrence of his cousin's 'mutiny', John was family, and Drake made strenuous efforts over the coming years to find his whereabouts. Prisoner exchanges and ransoms were not uncommon even between sworn enemies such as England and Spain. However his efforts proved fruitless, as the Spaniards were not letting on where they held John. In this most personal battle of wills between Sir Francis and Philip II, King of Spain, a prisoner with the name 'Drake' was special. The Spaniards may not have been able to capture the hated El Draco [*sic*] – 'The Dragon' – bane of their existence. Still, having at their mercy his namesake, a cousin to boot, was some small revenge. And with those state secrets locked up in John's head, there was never any chance the Spaniards would set him

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free. Persuaded by the Inquisition to repent his Lutheranism, John was glimpsed briefly in a procession for the auto-da-fé of 1589 wearing the red cross of those who had rediscovered the 'true faith'. He then disappears from view, except that a 'John Drake' does, tantalizingly, show up in the records of the Spanish Inquisition in 1650, when John would have been 88 and Sir Francis was long dead.

Another younker to suffer at the hands of the Inquisition was Miles Philips, just 14 when one of those put ashore in 1568 by Hawkyns whose ship became overcrowded with survivers from an attack against the English fleet at San Juan de Ulla in Mexico. More than a hundred mariners, men and boys, were left stranded on the American shoreline in the Gulf of Mexico, somewhere between modern-day Galveston and New Orleans. Along with Miles Philips was Hawkyns' nephew, Paul Horsewell, aged ten. Hawkyns vowed to return with ships and provisions to carry the men and boys home to England, but he broke his promise. Abandoned to their fate, Miles and Paul survived an attack by natives from the Chichemici tribe, who killed others of their companions but, dying of thirst and starvation, they finally surrendered to the Spanish in a nearby town. Miles described how he and his fellow captives 'remained prisoners in the said house [of the Viceroy] for the space of four moneths after their coming thither at the end whereof the fleete being readie to depart from St John de Ullua to goe to Spaine, the said Gentlemen were sent away into Spaine with the fleete where as I have heard it credibly reported, many of them died with the cruell handling of the Spaniards in the Inquisition house.'[12]

Miles was lucky. For five years, being deemed too young, he was spared the harshest punishments, instead being put to work as a servant 'to serve sundry gentlemen'. Then the Inquisition arrived in Mexico, and all those captives not already sent to Spain were rounded up and interrogated. Some were given '200 stripes on horsebacke, and some 100, and condemned for slaves to the gallies, some for 6 yeeres, some for 8 and some for 10'.[13] Others were burnt at the stake. Only the youngest, Miles included, were spared the worst punishments, the Inquisition judging them free of Lutheran heresies, since they'd left England before they were old enough to receive religious instruction:

> And then was I Miles Philips called, and was adjudged to serve in a monasterie for five yeeres, without any stripes, and to wear a fooles coat, or S. Benito during all that

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> time. Then were called, John Storie, Richard Williams, David Alexander, Robert Cooke, Paul Horsewell and Thomas Hull: the sixe were condemned to serve in monasteries without stripes some for three yeeres and some for foure and to weare the S. Benito during all the said time.[14]

Only in 1582 'after 17 yeeres absence, having sustained many and sundry great troubles and miseries'[15] did he return home to England.

What motivated these younkers to venture their lives in unknown lands and uncharted waters, where vengeful enemies and hidden dangers lurked everywhere? For some, the warm embrace of the Press Gang left them no choice. Young Richard Temple claimed that 'he being in the said port of Plymouth the said general John Hawkyns under commission he held from the Queen of England ordered him to go on board the flagship'.[16] William Cornelius, who had been at sea since he was 12, described how 'one day as he was going along the street unsuspectingly they fell upon him suddenly and hurried him on board as they were short of people owing to the fact that they were going to Guinea which had the reputation of being an unhealthy country where they would die from fever'.[17] As for John Drake and the boy with no name on Mocha Island, it was all about 'gold come as plentiful as this wood unto the ships',[18] or so Sir Francis Drake told them when, faced with mutiny in his fleet, he issued a rallying call to those aboard the *Elizabeth* just weeks before they ventured into the treacherous Magellan's Strait on the Famous Voyage. Addressing himself to the youngest boys among those assembled, 'he declared what wealth the worst boy in the fleet should get by this voyage, and how the worst boy should never need to go to sea again, but should be able to live in England with [like] a right good gentleman'.[19]

For Sir Francis Drake, 'worst boy' was, doubtless, a mere figure of speech, and if there was a worst boy back then he remained hidden from view. Not so some two centuries on when the Industrial Revolution spawned an avalanche of candidates for the title of 'worst boy', many of whom, seemingly, were to be dumped on Britain's navy. What is more, with so many candidates to choose from, Britain's cast-offs could no longer remain invisible, anonymous. They must have a name, height, colour of hair, everything that was necessary to distinguish them from other cast-offs. Like it or not, it would be possible for Britain to begin identifying its 'worst boy'.

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2

SCAPE GALLOWSES

'A sprightly boy, his character doubtful, read midling.'[1] Short, sharp and to the point. No call for heavy-duty psychological profiling. The captain, seeing this entry in a column marked 'Character' and taking on this boy in September 1786, knew pretty much what to expect. Add to this the information logged in the other columns of a ledger book entitled *Register of Boys Received – Discharged*, and the picture was complete:

> Date when received: Sept 13 1786
> Number: 1
> Name: Ja's Sidaway
> Age: 13
> Stature: 4ft 8inches
> Description: Brown hair with two scars in his head
> When discharged: Sept 29 1786
> To whom discharged: Gunner on the *Pearl*, Deptford
> In what capacity to serve: Servant
> No. of days victualled: 17.[2]

Here is none of the anonymity of Drake's 'worst boy', nor the facelessness of John Drake aboard the *Golden Hind*. This boy from 1786 had as good as a passport: name, age, height, even some distinguishing features. And he had done enough in 17 days to warrant his own sharply etched personality, all this despite being only

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13 years old. Once out at sea, Sidaway might well have receded into anonymity, and his destiny be no different to that of the younkers of 200 years before but, whatever that fate – living to a ripe old age, or being invalided out, shipwrecked, killed in action, or carried away by one of the many diseases that afflicted sailors – for a brief time in his life young Sidaway hit an official register.

To what body of late Georgian officialdom did Sidaway owe this, by the standards of the times, meticulous record? The organization in question is The Marine Society, founded in 1756, and the largest and most successful of a number of ventures launched about this time, including the Foundling Hospital, Christ's Hospital School and the Royal Hospital School, whose boys were to have a 'Destination to Navigation'. The first meeting of the Society was held in the King's Arms Tavern, Cornhill on 25 June of that year to approve 'A Plan of the Society for contributing towards a supply of Two or Three thousand Mariners for the navy'.[3]

The first batch of 41 boys was inscribed in the *Entry Book for Boys* (an early version of the *Register of Boys Received – Discharged*) on 5 August 1756. The very first boy entered was Anthony J. Philips. Unsurprisingly for a new organization, record-keeping was rudimentary and, in contrast to the relative wealth of detail given to Sidaway 30 years later, the entry for Philips has the bare minimum of information. Apart from his date of entry, his age, 15, and his place of abode, Bloomsbury, the only other detail given is in a column headed 'Parents or Fatherless', where Philips is listed as 'friendless' – meaning he was worse off than an orphan, having no relative to claim responsibility for him. Nor do we know where Philips began his seagoing career. To all intents and purposes, he vanished. The only clue to his whereabouts comes in the minutes of the Society's next meeting on 12 August:

> John Fielding having procured 24 boys for the sea service, they were all clothed by the Society… Order'd that 10 of the said boys be sent to Admiral Broderick and 14 to Capt. Barber of the *Princess Royal* at the Nore and that each Boy shall have a Testament, Common Prayer Book, Clasp Knife and a printed list of their Cloths.[4]

Philips was not the only boy passing through the Society in 1756 to have no official past and no future. Of the first 100 boys registered in the *Entry Book*, 29 were recorded as 'friendless' and another 21 as 'fatherless' or 'mother only'. Seventeen came from outside London, from as far afield as Somerset (Wm. Stacey, aged 14,

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friendless), Shropshire, Newcastle, Lancashire and Dublin (Patrick Furtel, aged 14, father 'Worsted Weaver'). Only occasionally are personal details given, as with six of the boys who had links to the sea, among them Gamaliel Shannon, aged 14, described as 'Father dead, was Lieut of a Man of War'.[5]

The perfunctoriness of these early entries relative to 30 years on could be a measure of an organization still in its birth-pangs. More likely, it is a reflection of the different pressures on the Society. In 1786 Britain was at peace, and there was time for the Society to be methodical in its bookkeeping. As a result, all 25 boys in the 'class' of 13 Sept 1786 enrolling with Sidaway had the same level of detail. There was Daniel Cameron, aged 15, height 4ft 6in., whose 'Description' was marked down as 'light brown hair, fair complexion, troubled with Trotts', and 'Character' as 'a wicked boy, reads well'.[6] Also, because it was peacetime, Daniel Cameron's 'No. of days victualled' at the Society was a leisurely 43 days, after which he was discharged as a 'servant' to 'Carpenter Merritt' on board the '*Canada*, Portsmouth'.

John Drangsill, another boy from that year's intake, spent an even more leisurely 153 days at the Society. No reason is discernible from the records why he spent so long there. Maybe without the pressure of war and captains baying at the Society's heels for 'volunteers', there was time to ensure that boys recovered from their ailments. Additionally, with Drangsill's 'Character' being 'a very good boy reads well', there is a possibility that his potential had been spotted and he was being groomed for a career in the merchant service, hence why he was discharged as an 'apprentice', not 'servant' to 'James Mather, Owner of the Ship *Nancy*'.[7]

Back in 1756, however, Britain was on edge, about to embark on another in the interminable string of deadly conflicts with France – this one the Seven Years' War – which bedevilled this period of the two nations' histories. Within weeks of its formation, the Society came under pressure from the 'Right Hon'ble the Lords of the Admiralty' to deliver on the 'Plan…towards a supply of Two or Three Thousand Mariners',[8] which it had submitted following its 1 July meeting. The minutes of the Society's 29 July meeting hinted at the urgency: 'A letter was read from John Fielding Dated 26 July Instant, signifying that the Commander of His Majesty's Ship the *St George* had applied for Thirty Boys.'[9] Not yet in a position to supply boys by its own efforts, the Society resolved instead to 'send Mr Fielding sixty pounds for the Clothing, Bedding and convoying to Portsmouth 30 boys on board His Majesty's ships.'[10]

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The growing feverishness of the war effort is palpable in the *Entry Book*, whose entries become ever more perfunctory. All we know of Boy 152 from the *Entry Book* is his name, Thomas White, and his date of enrolment, 30 September. White could have appeared from, and vanished back into, thin air for all the world knew; hardly a reassuring fact, especially given the speed at which these boys passed through the Society's doors before being whisked off to their port of embarkation – one week. This frenzy is further evidenced in the growing intensity of the Society's recruitment campaign. With the navy's manpower requirement rising from 10,000 to 80,000 during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), Fielding's '24 boys for the sea service'[11] were a drop in the ocean. From 1700, navy regulations allowed an admiral of the fleet 50 servants, an admiral 30 servants, a vice-admiral 20 servants, and a rear admiral 15 servants.[12] A captain was allowed four servants for every 100 crew, which, on a first-rate 100-gun ship-of-the-line with a crew of 800, equated to 32 captains' servants. These 'servants' were the future officers of the navy. Drawn from the ranks of 'young gentlemen', they were quite definitely not candidates for recruitment by the Society. Other officers and warrant officers were also allowed a quota of servants and it was these more lowly servants and cabin boys that the Society needed to find for the navy. Overall, this meant that between five and ten per cent of a ship's complement would typically have been 'servants' – be they 'young gentlemen' or 'boys'.

By the Society's calculations, some 4,500 servants alone were required at the outbreak of the Seven Years' War, and yet there were only 1,000 sons of gentlemen and 'reputable persons' considered available to fill this requirement. The Society launched a massive recruitment drive, with 2,000 advertisements placed in 'all the Daily Papers for One Week' and 'pasted up in the streets'[13] across the capital. There was no patriotic call to arms, instead a matter-of-fact statement of conditions of employment:

> All stout Lads and Boys who incline to go on board His Majesty's Ships, as servants, with a view to learn the duty of a seaman, and are, upon examination, approved by The Marine Society, shall be handsomely clothed and provided with bedding, and their charges borne down to the ports where His Majesty's Ships lye, with all proper encouragement.[14]

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Thus were spelt out the key ingredients in the three-way compact between the boy, the Society and the navy. The boys had to be 'stout', meaning able-bodied, which was in turn defined by the Society as no younger than 14 and no shorter than 4ft 3in. Practical considerations overriding all others, there was a job waiting for boys at sea, and there was no point sending weaklings to His Majesty's Ships: captains would only complain or reject them. Nevertheless, the Society's records are full of underage, undersized boys, such as Richard East, 3ft 11in. tall, aged ten. The Society's flouting of its own rules is best explained in light of the age limit set by the navy, which was 13, or 11 in the case of sons of naval officers, such as Richard Philip, aged 12 and 4ft 1in. tall, whose father was on board the ship he was being sent to.

'Upon examination' in the advertisement referred to the medical checks undertaken to identify 'the various Distempers which are the Constant Consequences of Poverty and Nastyness'[15] namely the 'trotts' and scurvy, both treatable. The 'pox' (smallpox), was an endemic condition and, again, no obstacle to entry. The 'itch' not a problem if the cause was the curable scabies, but a barrier to entry if it was symptomatic of the dreaded lice-borne disease known as ship fever (typhus), which could sweep away a whole ship's complement should just one new recruit come aboard infected with it. The Society retained on its staff a surgeon, John James, who checked for and treated the minor, curable skin afflictions and had its own lodgings in Grub Street, where the latest intake were sent to be scrubbed, disinfected and treated.

The word 'incline' in the advertisement points to boys being invited to join as 'volunteers'. Better a willing than an unwilling recruit was the reasoning, and a young one to boot. Although the Society would expand its role over the years to handle recruitment of landsmen, in the words of Jonas Hanway, driving force behind the foundation of the Society: 'It is beyond contradiction that those bred to the sea from the earliest part of life, generally become the ablest mariners … being inured to hardship they are not only rendered the more active and intrepid, but they can bear long voyages, winter cruizes and change of climate.'[16] He had evidently read all about Foxe's 'painefull Seaman'.

In return for agreeing to become 'servants', the boys would be clothed and given bedding, both not inexpensive items. According to the Society's own calculations, these costs were as follows:

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1756/7: £3,739 for 2,046 boys [= £1.83 per boy or *c.* £58.56 today]
1758: £1,770 for 930 boys [= £1.90 per boy or *c.* £60.80 today]
1759: £1,282 for 710 boys [= £1.81 per boy or *c.* £57.92 today]

A boy's kitbag typically included a felt hat, two worsted caps, a kersey pea jacket, waistcoat, shirts, up to three pairs of drawers, trousers and a couple of pairs of shoes. Bedding comprised a mattress, pillow and blanket. Kitting out the boys was the most important contribution the Society made, not only in financial terms but also in enabling the boys to feel at one with seaboard life. More significantly, a set of new clothes and bedding 'detached' the recruit from his disease-carrying lice.

The reference to 'proper encouragement' in the advertisement meant a wage of 40 shillings a year (*c.* £60 today), a considerable improvement on what a boy would receive for a land-based apprenticeship. With all these blandishments, what more could a boy want, especially if he were 'friendless' and, in Hanway's words, one of the 'distressed orphans, who wander about like forsaken dogs'?[17] Much more, in Hanway's opinion, for he saw his brainchild as having a higher purpose than that of mere recruitment agency. In tune with the enlightened philanthropy that swept Georgian Britain in the middle of the 18th century, Hanway and the other worthy founders of the Society cloaked their new venture in a thick veil of good intentions. Hanway loftily described his vision:

> You ask me if I am a philanthropist; well, yes Sir, I am… I am flattered you perceive in me more than the street urchins to whom I am known as a curiosity … they know that I can fit them for the sea… Without parents who should patronise them but persons like myself? Witness the wretched condition of the Climbing Boys [chimney sweeps]… The excuse is the urchin must have employment, or starve. What nonsense; there is employment enough at sea… In this wise we may save the climbing boys and prepare others for service with the fleet that being the chief purpose of The Marine Society.[18]

To reinforce the broad charitable roots of the Society, the early advertisements issued a general offer of assistance to the needy, whether suitable for the navy or not: 'If, in the meanwhile, any are in distress for want of the necessaries of life the same shall be provided for them, in the most satisfactory manner at the Society's house, under the care of Mr Fluyd, in Grub-street.'[19] Further emphasizing the

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evangelical message of noble intentions, the Society's committee resolved that it would be Society policy to 'take care of their souls as well as their bodies'.[20] Prior to being frogmarched by a 'conductor' to the coast – a journey, to Portsmouth, which took four days – the boys received religious instruction from a dominie, and the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge provided a Testament and Common Prayer Book. In addition, the Society gave each boy a copy of Archbishop Synge's *Essay towards making the Knowledge of Religion Easy to the Meanest Capacity*, whose title spoke volumes for what earnest messages awaited those who could read its contents. The boys may be forgiven for thinking that their other standard-issue bedtime reading, the *Seaman's Monitor*, offered lighter fare. Not a chance. Written by Reverend Woodward, it had precious little to do with practical seamanship and everything to do with strictures on sailors' indiscipline, godlessness and inveterate blaspheming. Emphasizing that there was no escape for the wicked, the message in the 1772 *Regulations of the Marine Society* was that 'religion makes the steadiest warriors'.[21]

With such a morally weighty reading list awaiting these boys on board ship, it is no wonder that the column marked 'Character' in the *Register of Boys* had, by the time Sidaway was passing through the Society's doors in 1786, an obligatory reference to literacy, be it 'very good boy, reads well', or 'an idle bad boy, very dull in learning, cannot read' or, somewhat ambivalently, 'a smart willing boy, can't read'.[22]

However philanthropic the intentions of the Society's founders, there is no disguising the more sinister means it used to fulfil its aims. Writing in 1758, Hanway set out how the Society was 'a means to render our highways and our streets more secure; and by a gentle or compulsive means remove the wretched crouds who disturb the peace of civil society.'[23] Compulsion was a direct contradiction of the Society's 1757 advertisements claiming that it was 'resolved not to infringe on the Liberty of the Subject'.[24] The resolutions of the Society's meetings show how it wrestled with this contradiction in practice. An overseer, called a 'providetor', responsible for housing the boys during their sojourn at the Society was expected to forewarn captains about the conduct of certain boys, but only by way of 'Private Intimations'. Especially wayward boys were shipped straight to a tender on the Thames where they were close confined, prior to joining their designated ship.

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The *Entry Book* left open whether some boys arrived at the Society's doors, if not under compulsion, certainly on the horns of Hobson's choice, as in the case of John Britchard (Entry 86), whose record does not indicate any crime but who still came by order of the Lord Mayor. As for Sam Hardman, aged ten, the only 'crime' he committed was one of association: his father was recorded in the *Entry Book* as a smuggler. Still, Hardman may have been placed with the Society with the consent of his father. As for the numerous orphans arriving from around the country, it is inconceivable that they did so under their own steam or with the consent of a parent. Rather, they arrived as a result of the Society's early recruitment drive with local magistrates, parish officers, aldermen, beadles and bishops. So successful was this campaign that the Society had to issue an advertisement telling local officials not to send further boys without prior agreement. If these boys' only 'crimes' were that they were 'friendless', 'distressed orphans, who wander about like forsaken dogs', it is difficult to square the Society's philanthropic aspirations with its means of compulsion, which were tantamount to the Press Gang, the only difference being that boys were too weak to resist its embrace.

However, in the case of the Higgins brothers (Entries 803, 804 and 805), registered as 'Three Thieves', there was no need for the Society to wrestle with any contradictions. These were out-and-out criminals, and it is implausible that they arrived at the Society of their own free will and made such an unabashed admission. More likely, they were accompanied, compelled by a court official who made the declaration on their behalf.

Going by the *Entry Book* alone, the Higgins brothers were the exception, in which case the Society's 'Doorkeeper' registering them on arrival could doubtless lay claim to having found Britain's worst boys. For Hanway, however, the Higgins brothers were just three among a cast of hundreds, if not thousands, of Britain's worst boys. By the *Regulations of the Marine Society* in 1772, he had Society boys classified according to whether they were good, or not so good and with 'little or no guard against temptation,' or were so 'abominably corrupted [by the] most wicked company, in the most wicked parts of these kingdoms' that they were 'hardened in iniquity.'[25] Hanway concluded that the majority fell into the last category.

The magistrate John Fielding echoed Hanway's cynicism, describing 'numberless miserable, deserted, ragged, and iniquitous pilfering Boys that at this Time shamefully infested the Streets of London'.[26] He also knew where to lay

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blame, referring to 'Shoals of Shop-Lifters, Pilferers, and Pick-pockets who, being deserted Children of Porters, Chairmen and low Mechanics, were obliged to steal for their Subsistence'.[27] And Fielding should know, because, as a senior magistrate for the Covent Garden district, he witnessed the human detritus of social dislocation passing daily through his courts. Henry Fielding, John's half-brother and himself a Justice of the Peace, dramatized the plight of these illegitimate offspring in *Tom Jones*, published in 1749, when he had Mrs Deborah say of the foundling Tom that 'it is, perhaps, better for such creatures to die in a state of innocence than to grow up and imitate their mothers, for nothing better can be expected of them'.[28]

Queen Anne's Act of 1703, allowing for vagabonds as young as ten to be sent to sea as maritime apprentices, was meant to have removed these unfortunate children from Britain's streets, so it was not as if the problems identified by the Fieldings, or indeed the proposed cure, were new; only more acute, more widespread, more intractable. Hanway and the Fieldings were seeing the Industrial Revolution begin to cast its shadow over the nation's towns and cities, fracturing traditional family and social structures and leaving in its wake thousands of cast-offs to fend for themselves. With the Poor Laws and Apprentice Laws militating against a wrongdoer whatever his age, and an offender's capacity to distinguish good from evil, often the only measure applied when deciding on the level of punishment, boys as young as 14 could be deemed fit for the gallows. By 1775 Hanway was noting that the majority of criminals being hanged were aged 16 to 21.

Faced with this crisis where 'for want of a seasonable relief, carts full of these unhappy wretches have ended their days in the vigour of their youth, at the dreadful tree',[29] it is no wonder Hanway would accept the necessity of compulsion, 'for by thus checking them in the very dawning of their iniquity, Tyburn might be left a desert'.[30] The Society offered Britain's street urchins a choice: the gallows or the sea, hence the nickname given to Society boys by their fellow mariners: 'Scape Gallowses'. Choose the sea, however, and they might find themselves side by side with the most unlikely of naval companions, one who, to read King George III's letters from just a few years on, had his own claim to be Britain's 'worst boy'.

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A ROYAL SAILOR

In October 1781, Yorktown surrendered to rebel forces under the command of General George Washington, ending British resistance in Virginia. Surely this was the beginning of the end for the British in the American colonies? Yet, six months on, the British were still doggedly holding out in New York. The city might be their last stronghold in the American colonies. Notwithstanding, it was defended by a formidable force of thirty thousand Redcoats. To give the British further solace, tensions were evident between the republicans of the American cause and their haughty royalist French allies, Canada remained stubbornly loyal to the British Crown, and Britain's unrivalled navy controlled the strategically vital sea routes along the eastern seaboard.

So the game wasn't up yet, which presented General Washington with a political problem. The war had already lasted five years. Washington firmly believed that final victory was in sight, but not all his fellow Americans saw it that way. Voices, wearying of the seemingly endless war, were raised in Congress and among the people. There was talk of compromise, truces, a peace treaty, anything rather than the prospect of an attritional fight to the last man standing. Fearful that total victory would be snatched from under his nose, not by the enemy but rather through lack of fortitude among his own, Washington desperately began casting around for a single tactical masterstroke that would shock the British, rock them to the core, shorten the war and mercifully end the bloody misery.

In March 1782, Washington's prayers seemed to be answered. Encamped in Morristown, New Jersey, news reached him via his all-seeing spy network that no

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less a personage than Prince William Henry, third son of King George III, had arrived in New York. What was this mere stripling of a boy doing 3,000 miles from the British court? Nothing, it seemed, apart from manifesting what one genteel New Yorker euphemistically referred to as 'a decided fondness for manly pastimes'[1] and ice-larking around on 'a small freshwater lake in the vicinity of the city, which presented a frozen sheet of many acres: and was thronged by the younger part of the population for the amusement of skating'.[2]

According to local reports, 'as the Prince was unskilled in that exercise, he would sit in a chair fixed on runners, a crowd of officers environed on him, and the youthful multitude made the air ring with their shouts for Prince William Henry'.[3] So the prince was having a high old time. No surprise, given his age, but what madness could have possessed the king to let his 16-year-old son come all this way to frolic and gambol within sniper's range of the rebel enemy? Certainly not the porphyria that incapacitated Britain's king in later years; the disease had not yet taken hold. So what, if anything, was the king's ploy?

The answer to this question begins four years earlier, in 1778, when Prince William's parents started agonizing over a fitting education for the third in line to the throne. Their eldest son, George, was already manifesting wild tendencies to debauchery, but, as heir to the throne, he must be kept close to court so as to best prepare him for kingship. Frederick, their second son, was destined for the army, the latest in a long line of soldier princes. As for William, he was already proving troublesome and must be kept gainfully employed, or he'd make mischief with his elder brothers.

A solution came staring the king and queen in the face during a visit they made to Portsmouth in the spring of 1778 for a long-overdue review of the navy. Britain had been at loggerheads with the renegade American colonies for the past two years, and the king saw the rebellion increasingly as a personal challenge to his royal power. However, away from court, opinion was divided about the justness of the rebel cause. The war was unpopular in the country, and the Whigs in Parliament were outspokenly sympathetic to the rebels. There were even captains in the navy refusing to serve on the American station.

Nevertheless, France's recent entry into the war on the side of the Americans should change all that. France was the old enemy. No loyal Englishman could possibly doubt any longer the justness of this war. Still, if the king were to trump

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the Whig waverers, the circumstances called for a masterstroke of statesmanship. He would show the nation that his royal family, the House of Hanover, was prepared to lead from the front, take the fight to the enemy. And what better way than to enrol his own 12-year-old son, William, in the navy? The Crown and the navy, the two supreme guardians of the national interest, would thus become one in the eyes of the people.

Affairs of state might dictate this tactical manoeuvre, but the king and queen were nothing if not caring parents, and there was no question of their third son being offered up as a sacrificial lamb. Therefore, before deciding on this novel form of royal education, they must see for themselves the life that a boy sailor could expect to lead. Arriving in Portsmouth and boarding the 90-gun flagship, *Prince George*, the king 'visited the three Decks to see the Men exercise as in Action…then saw the whole economy of the Ship'.[4] However, as with all official inspections, there was the inevitable *trompe l'œil*: the sailors kitted out in their best uniforms, the ship all spick and span, any evidence of the harsh reality that was a sailor's lot hidden from view. Hosts and guests alike colluded in the charade that official protocol dictated. Next came a 'surprise' inspection of the Portsmouth Naval Academy, one of the earliest institutions to provide shore-based training for future generations of naval officers. The king and queen were not impressed. No matter; the composite impression of discipline, natural order and camaraderie that they had witnessed first hand among the sailors and officers on board the *Prince George* fully convinced them that the navy was, coinciding fortuitously with the exigencies of statecraft, the ideal environment in which to complete the education of their handful of a third son. Prince William Henry had an alarming tendency to temper tantrums, a fact the king only alluded to some years later: 'William has ever been violent when controuled [*sic*]. I had hoped that by this time He would have been conscious of his own levity and that in his Station his conduct must be more studied than in that of Persons who from the privacy of their birth cannot be held out as examples for others to look up to…'[5]

The navy would soon sort that out – and more besides. The prince might even make a career of it in the navy. The decision taken, the king threw himself with gusto into preparations for his son's new life, even down to the smallest detail of attire, as the Governor of the Naval Academy, Sir Samuel Hood, soon discovered when the king wrote to him shortly after returning to London to ask 'what cloaths,

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