

## PART AND PARCEL OF A NATION'S TOTALITY

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Rodger, N. A. M. *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005. 907pp. \$45

It is no exaggeration to say that this multivolume study is the single most important contribution to scholarship on British naval history that has been written in more than a century. It clearly surpasses the previous multivolume general history: Sir William Laird Clowes's *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Time to the Present*, originally published in seven volumes between 1897 and 1903. *The Command of the Ocean* is the second volume of a projected trilogy. The first volume, *The Safe-*

*guard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain, 660–1649*, appeared in 1998, so the volume allotted for the two centuries from 1815 through the end of the twentieth century may be expected some years hence.

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Rodger's purpose in the trilogy is not to write an institutional or operational history of the Royal Navy but rather to present a naval history of Britain that puts naval affairs into context as part of general British history. This means that the focus is not limited to isolated battles, organizational development, or prominent leaders but includes and stretches beyond these aspects to see naval activity within the multiple contexts of all kinds of history, including political, social, economic, diplomatic, administrative, medical, religious, scientific, and technological. Rodger's intent is to spread the meaning of naval history beyond the naval service itself and to see it, much more appropriately, as the national endeavor that it is. Reflecting the best scholarly views of our era, Rodger strives to understand naval affairs as they involve all parts of government and society in Britain. In doing this, his trilogy is a trailblazing effort and a masterful achievement in the making.

Any attempt to write naval history on the broad level where Rodger operates immediately faces the problem of how to deal simultaneously with so many diverse levels of understanding and interpretation. Rodger takes his cue from John Ehrman's famous comment that "if national history may be compared to a cake, the different layers of which are different aspects of national life, then naval history is not a layer, but a slice of that cake." Rodger sees his slice of cake as one with four layers: the first, policy, strategy, and naval operations; the second, finance, administration, and logistics, including their technical and industrial interconnection; third, social history; and fourth, ships and weapons. Rather than trying to deal with these matters simultaneously in a way that would clot the brain, Rodger wisely shifts from one layer to another in a kind of symphonic orchestration that varies in its concentration and intensity. Each of his chapters has a thematic title, but each also has a short subtitle that tells the reader to which of the four levels the author is now turning his focus. Of the thirty-six chapters, nineteen deal with operations, nine with social history, six with administration, and two with ships.

The text itself occupies only 65 percent of the 583 pages of this weighty volume. In addition to the running text, sixty-one pages are devoted to seven appendixes that provide, respectively, a chronology of the period 1649–1815; statistics on the comparative strength of the Royal Navy with respect to four other powers; the size of the fleet and the types of vessels constituting it at eleven key points in this period; tables of rates of pay for officers and men at seven different points; a list of the admirals and officials who successively held eight key positions; annual statistics for the total number of seamen from 1688 to 1815; and annual statistics for naval expenditures from 1649 to 1815. Additionally, there are twenty-seven pages devoted to a glossary of English and foreign naval terms, eighty-nine pages of bibliography, ninety-nine pages of endnotes, and forty-two pages of index. Then, there are sixteen unnumbered pages of black-and-white illustrations in two sections. Thus, this volume and its predecessor are (as undoubtedly their successor will be) not only substantial works of fundamental interpretative importance but major reference works, books that belong in every library, personal or institutional, that has anything to do with naval affairs and its history.

Beyond such substantial statistics of girth and weight, this volume is even more importantly a new interpretation, one that arrived on the historiographical scene at a very timely moment to set the tone and provide the background for the bicentenary commemorations of Nelson's victory at Trafalgar. Unlike many works that preceded it, Rodger's does not glory in famous victories won but looks beyond them to think about the Royal Navy's more fundamental meaning to the nation. Rodger concludes that the significance of seapower for

British history lies equally in domestic politics and in foreign policy and war. The basic and fundamental foundation of British naval power was the ability of the state to maintain a strong national economy that could provide the state enough revenue to allow it to spend a huge proportion on a navy, with domestic political support for doing so. The ability to find such economic resources, in turn, was based on the broad relationships between domestic agricultural and industrial productivity, the system of international trade, and the defense of that trade and the nation in general—defense that the navy provided as its fundamental contribution. In bringing all of this about and making it a successful venture for national purposes, the skill, courage, and professional abilities of naval men were essential, as was an effective and efficient naval administration that built the ships, supported the fleets at sea, and fed and provided for the health of their crews. A navy is not an isolated feature of a nation or of a nation's history; it is fundamentally part and parcel of a nation's totality. Nicholas Rodger deftly explains all that with grace, wit, penetrating insight, and a brilliant command of the language.