

Review Essay

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David Syrett. *Admiral Lord Howe: A Biography*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, www.navalinstitute.org, 2006. xvi + 176 pp., illustrations, maps, index of ships, bibliography, notes, index, US\$29.95, cloth, ISBN 1-59-006-4.

“Black Dick” Howe, the sailor’s friend, was introduced to the naval profession as a 14-year old midshipman sailing in the disastrous Anson expedition of 1740, “a grim and terrifying experience” (p.3), became a post captain in 1746 at the age of 20, was captain of the ship that fired the first shots of the Seven Years War in 1755, and commanded the first ship into Quiberon Bay in 1759. The admiral commanding naval forces in America during the first two years of the War of the American Revolution, he did not achieve the political success he had hoped for, but handled his limited resources in masterly fashion. In 1781, after becoming an active member of the opposition in Parliament, he took command of the Channel Fleet and was responsible for the third relief of Gibraltar. There followed five years, from 1783 to 1788, as First Lord of the Admiralty. In 1790, he again took command of the Channel Fleet, and brought about one of the legendary British naval victories of the eighteenth century, the Glorious First of June, in 1794. For three more years, he continued to serve in command of the Channel Fleet, despite suffering dreadfully from gout and repeatedly offering his resignation to a Board of Admiralty that refused to let him go. Only months after finally being released from duty in 1797, he was brought out of retirement to bring the great Spithead mutiny to an end. He died, what was probably an agonizing death from gout, in 1799. It was a fabulous career. That he happened to be inarticulate, secretive, and difficult to get along with may explain why the only full biography preceding this one was, as it has been described elsewhere, an “unctuous” account by Sir John Barrow, in 1838. Howe’s flaws, whatever they may have been, did not prevent him from exerting a profound influence on the Royal Navy, and we badly needed a new biography.

In his preface, the late David Syrett (this may not be his last book, although it was published posthumously), warned the reader that Richard Howe was inarticulate to a fault – “Anecdotes abound about his perplexing and obscure employment of the English language, and the Admiral’s speeches in Parliament are legendary for their confusing and bewildering syntax...” – that he was “almost pathologically secretive about the reasons why he acted as he did on specific occasions,” and that partly by accident, partly by intent, most of Howe’s personal papers had been destroyed (pp. xv-xvi). Presenting such truncated sources to advantage places considerable demands on the historian, identifying and utilizing virtually all the primary material bearing on the subject, and using secondary sources with the utmost rigour. Syrett, who began searching for Howe papers at least thirty-five years before embarking on the biography, and who has written

extensively about the Royal Navy in the eighteenth century, met the challenge, and has managed to give us a detailed and balanced account of a great sea officer, never going beyond the evidence, and giving us the benefit of a familiarity with the eighteenth century navy built up over a lifetime of scholarship.

Why Howe was propelled into command of a 24-gun ship with the rank of post captain at the age of 20 is a point of some significance. As Syrett observes, he belonged to “the aristocratic clique that governed Hanoverian England”, and his subsequent appointment as flag captain in the 80-gun ship of the line, HMS *Cornwall*, at the age of 22 was a “grand act of patronage” by his old captain, Rear Admiral Charles Knowles. In 1758, he would be entrusted with the health and safety of Prince Edward Augustus, younger brother of George III. “The prestige acquired by Howe from such an event as this, while almost incomprehensible to the twenty-first-century man, was valuable beyond measure to a member of the governing elite in Hanoverian England.” (p. 22) Because Howe also had great ability, and constantly managed to be in the right place at the right time, he turned his connections and the interest that furthered his fortunes to advantage. In the Seven Years War his innovations resulted in improved sailing for HMS *Magnanime*, the ship under his command, and he produced directives and orders for the 1758 attack on St Malo that “formed the doctrinal basis for the conduct of Amphibious operations by the Royal Navy during the Age of Sail.” (p. 20) His subsequent activities in the Seven Years War earned him unusual distinction, and in 1762 he became flag captain in *Princess Amelia*, in which ship Prince Edward wore the flag of a Rear Admiral, a sign of royal approbation.

From the end of the Seven Years War until 1788, in addition to further demonstrating his operational skill, Howe was caught up in the politics and administration of the navy in the period of crisis marking the origins and aftermath of the War of the American Revolution. Syrett cut his academic teeth on this period of British naval history with his doctoral dissertation, later published as *Shipping and the American War, 1775-83* (London, 1970), and further expanded on the subject with his *The Royal Navy in American Waters, 1775-1783* (Aldershot, 1989). (I recall the surprise of a distinguished British maritime historian, on meeting David Syrett for the first time at a conference in Maine, when he found that he was not a British but an American scholar. When you think about it, rather a nice compliment.) The question Syrett addressed in 1989 was why British naval power could not crush the rebellion in America by cutting off supplies to the American rebels from Europe. He found “that the problems confronting British naval power were much more complex than just blockading the American coast.” That of course is exactly what Lord Howe discovered in 1776, but in his more recent investigation of Howe, Syrett has added an important dimension to his analysis. In 1989, Syrett argued that Howe and his brother General Sir William Howe, “products of the *ancien regime*,” lacked the ruthlessness and determination necessary to fight a war of annihilation. Syrett does not reverse himself in his latest book, but explains the special relationship Howe developed, through his sister, with Benjamin Franklin in 1774, and his attempt to negotiate an end to the constitutional deadlock between Britain and the American colonies. Although Howe must have realised by March 1775 that he would not be able to find a compromise between “no taxation without representation” and “the overriding supremacy of Parliament...,” the attempt to do so “showed at worst a

great degree of political arrogance and at best a supreme confidence in the ability of two men of good will to work out any problem no matter how difficult.” (p. 39)

The American war placed Howe, and his brother, General Sir William Howe, in a no-win situation. Appointed to restore peace, they arrived in America to find that the Declaration of Independence had made their mission irrelevant. Benjamin Franklin made this painfully clear in a letter to Lord Howe which said that reconciliation was now impossible, suggesting that Howe resign his command and return to private life. Further to this, George Washington’s refusal to talk to Howe in July 1776 made military action the only remaining option. The campaigns of the next two years were indecisive, and they damaged Howe’s standing at home, despite the skillful handling of his ships in the face of a superior French squadron under Le comte d’Estaing. In July 1778, he complained to the Secretary of the Admiralty that he “had been separated from the class of flag officers with whom I was first advanced to that rank”. Syrett speculates, on pretty good evidence, that Howe had now come to the conclusion that the government would use him as a scapegoat for the failure of its American policy. He responded to this with a demand for an enquiry into the conduct of the war, an enquiry which ended “without coming to a single resolution,” and from which Lord Howe emerged as one of the major naval figures in the ranks of the opposition. When the North administration fell in 1782, Howe was offered the command of the Channel Fleet, but “refused to accept the appointment until he and his brother had been vindicated and rewarded by a display of royal favour”. That he was created Viscount Howe of the Kingdom of England, and given command of the Channel Fleet, “was in some respects an astonishing act of political adroitness.” (p. 100)

Although Howe succeeded in the relief of Gibraltar, the activities of the Channel Fleet under his command had been less than decisive, and the end of the American war left the navy in a dysfunctional state. Howe’s reputation was again at risk, but as a stopgap measure under the dying Shelburne government in 1783, he was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty in place of Augustus Keppel, only to be replaced by Keppel less than three months later, when the North-Fox coalition assumed power. In December 1783, when William Pitt the younger formed a government Howe was recalled as First Lord. He remained in the office for five years, but found himself sidelined much of the time by William Pitt, who relied more on the Controller of the Navy, Charles Middleton, the future Lord Barham. Howe has received bad press for his actions as First Lord, and Syrett recognizes Howe’s faults, but he tries to explain rather than condemn. John Knox Laughton was less sympathetic: “...there appears to have been a coldness and polite impertinence on Howe’s part...[that] are quite consistent with the general opinion of his cold, unsympathetic rule while at the admiralty, and in accordance with the opinion of the pamphleteer who described him as ‘unfeeling in his nature, ungracious in his manner, and with a wonderful attachment to the dictates of his own perverse, impenetrable disposition’” (*Letters and Papers of Lord Barham*, Vol II, Navy Records Society 1909, pp. i-xii). Syrett points out that both Howe and Middleton were headstrong, that Howe was not an administrator by inclination or experience, whereas Middleton – an obscure post captain when he was appointed Controller in 1778 – found his element as a hard-nosed bureaucrat. Like Pitt, to whom he was distantly related by marriage, he was a man “of business who understood public finances and administration, and shared a vision of

the importance of British naval power” (p. 111). Howe resigned in July 1788 but the king, to show there had been no condemnation of Howe’s conduct, created him “Earl Howe and Baron Howe of Langar, with revision in this honour in default of male issue to the female line”, a unique and unprecedented honour.

During this period Howe had devoted much thought to command and control of ships and fleets in battle, a problem he had dealt with most effectively in both the Seven Years War (the order book for HMS *Magnanime*, now in the National Maritime Museum, is the earliest order book that survives today) and the American War. The opportunity to further advance and put his ideas into practice arose when he was given command of the Channel Fleet in 1790, at the time of the Nootka crisis. This was another most unusual development, being appointed to a subordinate position after serving as First Lord. Other innovative sailors of the period like Rodney and Kempenfelt had been devoting much effort to an effective use of signals in battle, and were often critical of Howe’s methods, but in the end Howe’s *Signal Book for Ships of War* was “the first truly numerical system introduced into the Royal Navy” (p. 118) and in 1799 it was incorporated into the first official Admiralty signal book. Howe drilled the fleet in the new signal book and tactical exercises before relinquishing his command in September 1790.

When the French Revolutionary War broke out in 1793, Howe was again called upon to command the Channel Fleet. As Syrett points out “all the fighting admirals of the American War, with the exception of Howe, were otherwise dead or not available.” (p. 121) Howe himself was suffering from the gout, and frequently exercised command from ashore. This would present numerous problems over the next few years, but it did not affect the combat capability of the fleet. “It was perhaps the best constituted fleet with which Britain had ever begun a war in the eighteenth century...” (p. 131). The French fleet, after the Revolution, had much less experience in its ranks, although it was well led and would demonstrate remarkable skill and determination in battle. When the two fleets met in battle in on the first of June 1794, the British finally prevailed with superior gunnery. This was the final operational success in his long naval career, but even after retirement in 1797, Howe was again called upon, this time “through force of personality” to persuade seamen to return to their duty after the great Spithead mutiny.

It is impossible to disagree with Syrett’s judgement that Howe “was one of the great figures in the history of the Hanoverian Royal Navy”. Recently, others of Syrett’s vintage, Roger Knight and Roger Morriss, have shown that Howe was one of the key precursors to Lord Nelson, and that there was a creative tension between Howe and Middleton (Peter Le Fevre and Richard Harding (eds) *Precursors of Nelson*, London, 2000), but none have placed Howe in the framework of the eighteenth century navy as well as Syrett. It was a splendid final accomplishment, in Syrett’s extraordinary publishing record, to bring this naval hero out of the relative obscurity he had been in for over two hundred years.

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