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Roy Adkins and Lesley Adkins, *The War for All the Oceans: From Nelson at the Nile to Napoleon at Waterloo*. New York: Viking, 2007. Pp. xxvi, 534. ISBN 978-0-670-03864-0.

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This recent account of the naval aspects of the Napoleonic Wars emphasizes that the Royal Navy essentially won those wars for Great Britain. While it will probably be popular among general readers, it is badly lacking in many respects and will not offer scholars very much. In fact, given what professional historians have already written about the period, this reviewer is unclear why the book was published. The authors are identified as historians and archaeologists and Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of London; between them, they have published three previous books, including Roy Adkins' *Nelson's Trafalgar: The Battle That Changed the World*.¹ But if they are in fact professionally trained historians, it is not demonstrated here.

The book is a fairly straightforward narrative of the Napoleonic naval wars from Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt in 1798 until his final defeat at Waterloo in 1815. It begins with a significant focus on Horatio Nelson's defeat of the French fleet off Egypt and Napoleon's subsequent defeat on land. The authors then cover French invasion attempts of England, Britain's preemptive strike on the Danes, continued British foiling of French invasion fleets, and British conquest of French colonies in the Caribbean. Next come rising tensions with the United States, British conquest of French and Dutch colonies in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, the naval aspects of the War of 1812, and even the British Navy's role in transporting Napoleon to St. Helena after Waterloo. Along the way, the Adkinses bring in naval figures who took part in other endeavors, such as Sir Sidney Smith and his espionage activities. They further describe what naval life was like for both officers and enlisted men, as well as for sailors' families. They also detail the Royal Navy's participation in ground campaigns and sailors' attempts to escape from French prisons.

The book's central argument, again, is not only that the Royal Navy was key to Allied victory in the Napoleonic Wars but that it was *the* instrument of victory. Some historians and politicians have been enunciating this sort of position since 1815, but without much evidence or cogency. In the present instance, the authors have consulted a wonderful array of sources—especially primary sources. In particular, their Bibliography lists many memoirs from British naval personnel. That, however, may be the problem: by focusing so narrowly on the participants' very words, the authors may be looking a bit too closely at the bark and missing the tree, not to mention the forest. Though they cite secondary sources, I miss works by David Chandler² or Paul Kennedy; the latter's *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mas-*

¹ 2004; rpt. NY: Penguin, 2005.

² See *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (NY: Scribner, 1966) and *Napoleon* (1973; rpt. Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword, 2001).

tery³ demonstrates that while the Royal Navy was, in fact, a crucial component of Allied victory, it was only one of several. The Adkinses claim that naval supremacy allowed the British to conquer virtually all French colonies, starve Napoleon of trade, and still mount strikes on the European periphery. Kennedy would agree, but he goes a significant step further in pointing out that British dominance of the sea ensured control of not only trade but also finance, shipping, banking, and insurance. He further shows its financial dominance allowed Britain not only to operate its Navy and merchant fleet and maintain a small Royal Army, but even more importantly, to subsidize its Continental allies, Prussia, Austria, Russia, and Portugal, not to mention numerous Germanic states and the Ottoman Empire. The Continental powers were therefore able to supply the majority of the ground troops that defeated Napoleon. In short, Allied victory was one of, to use a twentieth-century term, “combined arms warfare.”

The Adkinses talk only too briefly about the ground campaigns, unless there was significant naval involvement in the form of landing parties. But even granting that their book is about the Royal Navy’s role in the wars, merely asserting their main thesis without concrete evidence for it, while ignoring the role of the Royal Army and Allied ground forces is questionable history at best. The Royal Navy alone was not sufficient to ensure victory and, just as we are learning ever so slowly *vis-à-vis* air power in our own day, one does not win wars without ground troops that can completely defeat an enemy and occupy territory. In this case, the British could not have done without their allies, especially Russia and Prussia.

There is also a major problem with the book’s organization. Given their non-specialist target audience, the authors have adopted a very straightforward, chronological narrative that proves unsuited to describing life in the British Navy and the Navy’s place in British society, while at the same time attempting to describe strategy, operations, tactics, and action. If the authors had adopted a thematic approach, like that of N.A.M. Rodgers in his *Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815*,⁴ their book would have been better organized and less disjointed. Given all that they set out to describe in each chapter, the Adkinses’ narrative is broken between the Navy’s operations and the social history of the institution and its members. This makes for a very confusing, incomplete, and incoherent story. Entire chapters are sometimes devoted to stories of events like British sailors breaking out of French prison camps and fortresses, with a bit of strategy, operations, and tactics of the war seemingly thrown in for good measure!

Related to the book’s structural problems is its use of sources. The authors quote memoirs very liberally: block quotes frequently occupy half a page or more, the narrative devolving into a mere string of quoted matter without any analysis of its accuracy.

The authors also fail to sufficiently explore new or previously not well covered aspects of naval warfare. For instance, they describe the presence of wives and children on ships at certain times, but never fully develop the topic. As another example, I had not, until this book, thought about the problem of lightning at sea as an operational hazard. But this subject, too, is hastily dealt with before the authors rush on to stories about the fate of Nelson’s horse and the social norms associated with the disposal of dead bodies washed up on shore. The Adkinses even find a couple of instances of Americans captaining British Navy

³ 1976; rpt. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2006.

⁴ NY: Norton, 2005.

warships but only mention their names without explaining how and why the men wound up working for “the enemy.”

This book is an example of a new genre of history written largely by non-professional historians, especially journalists, since the 1990s. As I review more and more of these books, I become more and more suspicious of non-specialists trying to write history. There is certainly nothing wrong with narrative, and professional historians could learn a great deal about it again. But books like *The War for All the Oceans* are poorly researched and structured, negligent in evaluating sources, and, worst of all, unoriginal. Unfortunately, the greed of publishers, the historical amnesia of the reading public, and the stereotype that professional historians are boring force us to spill much ink over books that need not have been written.