

Naval Families, War and Duty in Britain, 1740-1820

Review Number: 2104

Publish date: Thursday, 11 May, 2017

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ISBN: 9781783271092

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £65.00

Pages: 296pp.

Publisher: Boydell Press

Publisher url: <https://boydellandbrewer.com/naval-families-war-and-duty-in-britain-1740-1820-hb.html>

Place of Publication: Woodbridge

Reviewer: Catherine Beck

The social history of the navy is a rapidly developing field and there is a recent trend for studies which seek to uncover the complex and varied personal experiences of officers and sailors, as well as to trace broader trends in cultural representation. Ellen Gill's close reading of the correspondence of a handful of officers and naval women reveals both the personal, emotional experiences of these individuals as well as how they conceived of their national and personal duty. This is Gill's first monograph, developed from her doctoral thesis submitted in 2011, and is a valuable contribution to the field, especially as a counterpoint to recent statistical studies on naval background and demography.

From the outset, Gill neatly illustrates her core aim to place family at the heart of naval history. *Naval Families* opens with a comparison of an officer's affectionate letter to his wife, lamenting how his naval service kept him from her and their young children, in stark contrast to Horatio Nelson's patriotic proclamation 'I will be a hero!' quoted in Robert Sothey's *Life of Nelson* (1813). Gill directly challenges the unthinking use of the 'naval hero' as representative of the officer class and a tendency in naval history to view officers and their actions in isolation from their familial obligations (p. 5–6). Her close reading of correspondence reveals how family formed the foundation of many officers and sailors' naval identity as well as shaped their careers. Naval language was littered with familial phrases such as 'children of the service' and 'brother officer' which show the importance of paternalism and fraternal friendships. An officer's family also formed the centre of his patronage and correspondence network, meaning that those with few or weak familial connections ultimately suffered in their careers. Family is likewise at the centre of Gill's unpacking of the myriad 18th-century connotations of 'duty'. Duty is easy to conflate in naval history with patriotic service and, indeed, Gill does not entirely escape the semantic pitfalls of the shorthand. However, her expansion of an officer's duty to include his obligations to his wife, children and extended relations alongside his patriotism illuminates the numerous emotional tensions experienced during war. Gill also extends her discussion beyond officers to include the conceptualisation of female duty, patriotism and their role in naval networks as well as the experiences of sailors and non-officers.

The study is based on an impressive body of correspondence from a select few naval officers and wives, army officers and their families, and one sailor named James Whitworth. As with all epistolary studies, the correspondence reveals glimpses of the structures of individual lives, but is far richer in uncovering the

priorities and ideals revealed in the self-styling of letter-writing. Gill acknowledges that her work builds on Sarah Pearsall's framework for familiar networks in *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* as well as Linda Colley's critique of patriotic gender roles in *Britons: Forging a Nation 1707–1837*.⁽¹⁾ Gill's critique of female correspondence also adds to Margarette Lincoln's work on the experiences of naval women in *Naval Wives and Mistresses 1740–1815*.⁽²⁾ Her empirical definition of duty based on these individual expressions is also extremely valuable in providing the context for N. A. M. Rodger's work on honour and gentility as well as Evan Wilson's recent monograph *A Social History of British Naval Officers, 1775–1815*.⁽³⁾ Her comparison of the officers' sense of familial and patriotic duty to that of the sailors and workers in the Royal Dockyards also provides a neat conceptual framework which complements recent edited editions seeking to further explore the experience of ordinary seamen, such as Helen Watt and Anne Hawkins *Letters of Seamen in the Wars with France, 1793–1815*.⁽⁴⁾

Gill's selection of case studies allows her to dig deep into officers' and sailors' individual expressions of familial affection and patriotism which underpinned their sense of duty. The large collection of Philip Bowes Vere Broke and his wife Louisa's letters form the foundation of her analysis for chapters one to four. Each chapter is also supplemented with examples drawn from other collections including, but not limited to, the published papers of Matthew Flinders and George Bass, famous for their involvement in voyages of exploration, as well as Thomas Knollis, an army captain. Epistolary sources naturally lend themselves to the study of officers which survive more frequently in the historical record than letters from women and those from lower down the social scale. Gill counterbalances this in chapter five and six by drawing on the correspondence of Susana Middleton and the sailor James Whitworth's unhappy correspondence with his wife. She also considers the petitions of shipwrights and artificers in the Royal Dockyards, and the petitions of sailors during the 1797 mutinies at Spithead and the Nore. Her analysis of roughly a thousand petitions is an impressive piece of research and provides an interesting counterpoint not only to Whitworth's emotional letters but also to wider scholarship on poor-relief letters and other civilian and military forms of petitioning. In her critique of each set of papers one thing is clear: family was firmly at the centre of many naval lives.

The book is divided into seven chapters of which the first five primarily consider the experience of officers and the last two compare this with the experiences of the lower-deck. Chapters one and two consider how officers reconciled their wartime patriotic duty with their familial obligations during long periods of separation. Gill focuses particularly on the emotional strain of separation but also how correspondence became vital in maintaining relationships between officers and their wives, as well as with their children. Gill argues that this correspondence, which served a very practical role, was also where officers and naval wives explored and developed their sense of patriotic and familial duty. In chapters three, four and five, Gill develops her exploration of the role of family further by focusing particularly on patronage and networks. Chapters three and four both deal with the success or failure of an officer's career dependant on his parents' connections both inside and outside the navy and chapter five considers the role of naval and military wives within the 'naval community'. Gill makes some important points about the emotional and individual experiences of naval patronage. She argues that the importance of family in naval identity was responsible for the paternalism some captains showed their protégés (p. 103). Many officers were also keen to only use their naval and political connections to help their sons advance in the service so that they could better perform their patriotic duty (p. 16). Her exploration of Philip Broke's close relationship with Henry Hotham in chapter four is important in re-establishing the role of close male friendship in the history of naval identity and careers. Gill also provides a valuable case study on naval career progression in her detailed analysis of William Fiott, who was one of the unfortunate officers in the Napoleonic War who never made the step to post-captain. Fiott suffered emotionally and socially because of his lack of familial connections and his lack of success made him question his sense of national duty. Interestingly, although he was happy to criticise his superior officers as well as the king, he always considered himself as behaving patriotically. Fiott neatly illustrates Gill's argument that officers had a complicated sense of their duty to the navy as well as their patriotic duty to the nation.

The book is well-structured but at points the narrow use of certain terms undermines Gill's wider conclusions. Gill is inclined to use patronage to refer almost exclusively to the career assistance secured by

soliciting governmental boards and the social elite. She is not alone in this restricted definition. In a sociological sense, patronage is defined more broadly as the reciprocal support meted out between connections of varying intimacy and social proximity, but many historians use it as a shorthand for elite corruption and the separation of individuals of different social levels. When framing her argument Gill places 'official patronage networks' in direct opposition to 'personal naval networks' (p. 7) but in chapter three, she includes patronage, quite rightly, in her wider discussion of friendship networks. This clashes with her bold claims that the naval networks she discusses were familial in nature and, therefore, 'functioned outside existing, official patronage networks' (p. 13).

Most importantly, her conflation of patronage with elite networks limits her otherwise excellent discussion of sailors and dockyard workers in chapters six and seven. In chapter seven, she opens her discussion by arguing that sailors and dockyard workers did not have 'the luxury of appealing to a relative, patron or family friend to advance their career or have their needs met' (p. 199). However, she effectively illustrates that both James Whitworth in chapter six and the men and women in chapter seven relied on their extended familial and friendship connections for career and social support. In chapter six, she describes an especially interesting episode in Whitworth's career where his family drew on their wide network of friends to save him from a court martial for desertion. She describes this as Whitworth's 'civilian and familial, community networks of friendship' (p. 197) rather than his use of patronage. Gill is not wrong that it was more difficult for ordinary sailors and dockyard workers to gain access to elite officer networks but by couching Whitworth's patronage in terms of 'community' she draws an unnecessary and, in some ways, unhelpful distinction between the experiences of officers and sailors.

A similar issue arises in her discussion of women's involvement in naval networks. Gill is largely successful in her extension of the experience of naval life to include the wives, mothers and daughters of naval officers and sailors. However, there is an underlying sense in her study that female networks and friendships were both peripheral and secondary to those of their male counterparts. Gill's central point is that women's duty, and by extension their patriotism, centred on their commitment to their family and alongside this she casts naval wives as key agents within the 'naval community'. She uses community in other instances to refer to the network of intimate friendships between naval officers at sea, which she further defines as 'ostensibly free from patronage or official interest' (p. 11). These intimate friendships only formed a part of the male experience because they also had access to 'official' friendship, which Gill uses broadly to refer to formal connections with captains or admirals who could secure Admiralty patronage. Although Gill provides several examples of female involvement which could be included in a wider definition of patronage, especially Louisa Broke's role at Plymouth, she firmly defines their networks as familial and therefore operating outside 'official patronage'. Not only does this weaken her valuable argument that family, and by extension women, formed the base of many naval careers, but it also prevents her from drawing wider conclusions about female agency in naval life.

Gill's definition of 'personal' and 'official' friendships is effective as a broad conceptual category in her discussion of family but quickly becomes unwieldy when she begins to talk about patronage, networks and community. In chapter four, she acknowledges the difficulty in distinguishing 'personal from official friendship' in officers' correspondence because they often referred to all their connections as 'friends' (p. 122). Every study which focuses on 18th-century friendship and patronage encounters this problem and Naomi Tadmor dedicates an entire chapter to unpicking the breadth of relationships incorporated within the eighteenth-century use of 'friend' in *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England*.⁽⁵⁾ Emrys Jones in his book *Friendship and Allegiance in Eighteenth-Century Literature* ⁽⁶⁾ also discussed the difficulty in consistently applying the 18th-century terms 'personal' or 'particular' friend to what we now perceive as close affectionate friendships. One solution is to dispense with the categories 'personal' and 'official' altogether and instead define each relationship individually. One of the advantages of a tightly focused study like Gill has undertaken is that it allows for greater flexibility than is possible in larger statistical studies, which are naturally limited by the need for firmer categories within data sets. However, it is necessary for Gill to draw a consistent distinction between those friends in high places who offered support but did not socialise in other ways, and those friends who offered companionship but no career support. In this case, the

term ‘affective’ friendship may be more helpful in distinguishing intimate relationships from distant professional and societal connections than the ‘personal’ / ‘official’ dichotomy.

These issues in terminology do not detract from the overall value of this work. *Naval Families* is an impressive, detailed exploration of individual experiences of war from men and women of all classes in both the navy and the army. Gill is clear and explicit about her conclusions and turning to almost any section of the book rewards the reader with a snapshot of her wider argument. At the end of her introduction, Gill states that her exploration of the personal and emotional experience of officers and their families creates ‘a deeper and more nuanced understanding’ of naval life and duty (p. 13). In many ways, she is selling her study short. *Naval Families* provides an essential counterpoint to recent larger statistical surveys of naval demography and career mechanisms undertaken by S.A. Cavell, Jeremiah Dancy and Evan Wilson. In *A Social History of British Naval Officers, 1775–1815* Wilson considers trends in the effect of officers’ backgrounds on their career progression as well as their claims to gentility. But, as he acknowledges, the value of a large statistical study is gained at the expense of details that are harder to uncover in the historical record, such as the role of female relations in an officer’s career, or an officer’s perception of the nature and value of his service. Gill’s close focus on the experiences of a few officers allows her to tackle the multifaceted issue of ‘duty’ and to research the deeper familial context of each officer which explains his network connections and, in some cases, career choices.

Naval Families adds more than just nuance to our understanding of naval life and duty. Gill’s grounding of officers and sailors in their familial context provides a comprehensive exploration of 18th-century naval friendship and patriotism. I would recommend this book not just to naval historians but to anyone looking to incorporate a naval dimension to 18th-century patriotism, family and friendship, beyond the shadow cast by Nelson.

Notes

1. Sarah Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2008); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT, 1992).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Margarete Lincoln, *Naval Wives and Mistresses 1740–1815* (London, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Evan Wilson, *A Social History of British Naval Officers, 1775–1815* (Martlesham, 2017).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Helen Watt and Anne Hawkins, *Letters of Seamen in the Wars with France, 1793–1815* (Martlesham, 2016).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage* (Cambridge, 2001), 167-215.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Emrys Jones, *Friendship and Allegiance in Eighteenth-Century Literature: The Politics of Private Virtue in the Age of Walpole* (London, 2013).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/257063>