

Review Articles

Editing Naval Documents: The Case of the War of 1812

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Editing Naval Documents: An Historical Appreciation. [JOYE LEONHART, ed.] Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1984. v, 61 p.

The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History. Volume I: 1812. WILLIAM S. DUDLEY, ed. Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1985. Iiv, 714 p. illus., maps. ISBN 0-318-18798-1 \$34.00.

In contrast to the historiography of the Second World War, which has reached a high level of sophistication, the naval history of the War of 1812 has hardly progressed beyond the nationalism of Theodore Roosevelt or the navalism of Alfred Mahan. For the United States Navy, the War has become a rite of passage in which that youthful service met the world's most powerful navy in combat and scored impressive victories. *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, is unfortunately part of this rite. Government bodies and universities in the United States have maintained a tradition of publishing hard-copy document collections in all fields of American history. The publication of historical documents is, however, out of fashion in Canada, where archivists and historians have devoted their time to other seemingly more attractive pursuits.¹

Rear Admiral D.H. Kane, Jr., in his Foreword to *Editing Naval Documents: An Historical Appreciation*, makes it quite clear that this collection of essays is an official publication. These papers are, in his words, "an ideal way to describe and explain the [United States] navy's support of this form of scholarly activity." The four papers in the collection were originally presented to the Sixth Naval History Symposium at Annapolis, Maryland, in 1983. The papers are "The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History" by William S. Dudley, "Naval Documents of the American Revolution" by William James Morgan, "The Papers of John Paul Jones" by James C. Bradford, and John B. Hattendorf's "Purpose and Contribution in Editing Naval Documents: A General Appreciation."

Hattendorf's important essay discusses the different approaches that have been taken in editing naval documents in Great Britain and the United States. Although the operational details of the American Revolution or the War of 1812 have few tactical or even strategic implications for today's commanders, the United States Navy continues to emphasize the professional relevance of documentary editing.² Thus the publishing of

naval documents in the United States has always been primarily an official function. As Hattendorf notes, official sponsorship has led to an emphasis on naval operations and battle as opposed to the other equally important aspects of naval life. The situation in Great Britain has been rather different. In 1893, Rear Admiral Sir Cyprian Bridge and historian John Knox Laughton formed the Navy Records Society, patterned after the Camden Society and the Hakluyt Society. Since its first publication in 1894, the Society has produced more than 125 volumes of naval documents, which date from the fifteenth century to World War Two. In contrast to the United States Navy's preoccupation with complete campaigns, the Navy Records Society approach has been more varied and discrete. Volumes have been produced on social history, maritime law, and naval administration, as well as volumes of more standard memoirs and journals. Hattendorf attributes the difference in focus to the respective sponsors of the publications. Official document collections demand completeness, and do not have to worry about the crass world of marketing to which even staid scholarly societies must pay heed. Perhaps there are deeper reasons, beyond mere balance sheets. As "official history," naval documents in the United States also serve an ideological function. This goes beyond telling the "good guys' " side of the story. Nations, especially those born of revolution, require a certain legitimacy, and what better way to provide it than by printing documents from the nation's glorious past? On the other hand, historians of the Royal Navy have neither need nor inclination to provide a single all-encompassing view of their subject. Some have not even been naval officers or British subjects.³ Historians have attacked the Royal Navy as they would any other institution, and their approach is evident in the collections published by the Navy Records Society.⁴

Hattendorf divides published naval documents into six categories: (1) general naval history; (2) specific themes; (3) individuals; (4) book-length manuscripts including journals, diaries, and treatises; (5) operational dispatches; and (6) calendars. The British have excelled in Categories 2, 3, and 4, while the United States Navy department has led the way in Category 5. Hattendorf includes calendars in his list of document collections but, as he mentions only one, it is hard to see why they should be listed.⁵ Significantly, Hattendorf does not consider archival microfilming as historical editing and yet the microfilming of historical documents is certainly of greater importance to the scholarly community than many of the calendars once so painstakingly prepared. Nor does he consider the possibility that naval documents could be presented in a machine-readable form. As shown by the Maritime History Group at Memorial University, this technique can be used to make such documents as naval personnel records more readily available to scholars.

In closing, Hattendorf laments the lack of a volume of "select documents in either British or American naval history, which effectively gives a readily accessible and representative collection of sources for the general student to use." But why this missing tome should be required is difficult to understand. Single volumes of documents on such a broad subject as naval history are impractical for nations with long naval traditions. To represent the richness of the sources available for the history of the Royal Navy in one volume is virtually impossible. Such a scheme's only chance of success would be in publishing the documents of countries with rather less ancient naval traditions, such as Canada or Australia.

James C. Bradford's essay, "The Papers of John Paul Jones," is a lively discussion of the vicissitudes of producing an edited edition of the works of the most famous American

naval hero. The project of which Bradford is editor is producing a comprehensive microfilm edition of Jones' papers and a selected letterpress edition of his correspondence. Bradford has had a difficult task, for no single repository holds the majority of Jones' papers. Indeed, because of his subject's wide travels, Bradford and his team have had to search many European as well as American and British archives. It is a tribute to the editor's honesty that he admits that the search has not been as thorough as he would like. In a sad commentary on contemporary scholarship, Bradford describes the difficulties involved in translating documents composed in Russian for Jones while he was in the Russian navy. All of Jones' papers in French, Spanish, Dutch, or German were, for the purposes of the project, translated into English. It is not clear from Bradford's description whether only the English translation will be published. While this decision could be defended on the grounds of economy for the letterpress edition, surely the more complete microfilm version demands the original language of composition, with the translation thrown in as a sop to the linguistic disabilities of contemporary historians.

William James Morgan, in "Naval Documents of the American Revolution," presents a wholly different endeavour. The nine massive volumes published to date average 1,500 pages per volume, have taken twenty-four years to produce, and have reached only to the year 1777. The cost must be staggering. Needless to say, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* is an official U.S. Navy publication. That such an exercise has not been attempted elsewhere is not to be wondered at, for only an organization such as the U.S. Navy could possibly afford the cost. Morgan emphasizes that this collection is to be "the all-time definitive primary source ... on every aspect of the naval/maritime history of the American Revolution." Unlike earlier official U.S. naval collections, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* does include documents from British and European repositories. This feature is certainly a step in the direction of definitiveness, but one wonders whether completeness is possible, given the U.S. Naval Historical Center's definition of "naval document."⁶

William S. Dudley's "The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History" is meant as an introduction to, and description of, an eventual three-volume collection of documents by the same name. This project, which began in 1978, will be limited to roughly one volume for each year of the war. Thus, in comparison with *The Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, it will be much more selective in its coverage, while at the same time still being large enough to provide more than a mere overview of the conflict.

The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History is an official United States Navy publication, whose aim is made clear in the dedication by the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral James D. Watkins: "The purpose of this series is to publish rare, inaccessible and deteriorating documents for the enlightenment of all who wish to study the origins of American sea power." In his preface the editor is rather more circumspect: "The objective of this work is to display the underpinnings of the U.S. Navy during the era of the War of 1812, and in this way to help explain both its successes and failures at a formative time in its institutional history." This collection is not meant to be a balanced study of the naval aspects of the War of 1812, but is rather a documentation of the United States Navy in that war. This official perspective causes the editor to miss a number of opportunities for presenting a fresh interpretation of this conflict to his intended audience, the American naval professional and the American public.

Volume 1 opens well enough with a useful discussion of the editorial method used in its preparation.⁷ The Introduction itself amounts to a summary history of the United

States Navy between 1775 and 1805. The documents are divided into five chapters, one each for the maritime causes of the war, the northern lakes (in 1812), the Gulf Coast theatre (in 1812), and two chapters for operations on the Atlantic Ocean in 1812.

Chapter 1, "The Maritime Causes of the War: 1805-1812," is the most abbreviated of the lot: seven-and-a-half years are presented in nineteen documents. All of the familiar ground is covered, including British interference with U.S. shipping, the Royal Navy's impressment of American nationals, and the notorious *Chesapeake — Leopard* and *President — Little Belt* affairs. In dealing with British interference with neutral rights during the 1790s and 1800s, the editor is restricted by his starting date of 1805. Between 1793 and 1805, the Royal Navy sent more than one hundred American vessels captured as prizes of war into Halifax alone. None of the available British prize court records have been used to demonstrate just how long-standing American grievances were in this respect.⁸ Indeed, from the British documentation one gets the impression that the Royal Navy had not yet reconciled itself to the results of the American Revolution. The case for impressment of American "citizens" as a cause of the war is presented solely from U.S. newspaper accounts. The editor does note that "the Royal Navy [had an] insatiable need for seamen," but unfortunately we are not given a British document to defend this acquisitive policy. Similarly, the *Chesapeake — Leopard* incident is reported only from the U.S. side. Certainly some presentation of British documents would have helped, if only to illustrate the Royal Navy's contempt for everything American. The *President — Little Belt* action is documented in a more balanced manner, but here the editor is caught in a seeming contradiction. In his essay "The Naval War of 1812," Dudley describes Commodore John Rodgers as taking "the initiative in attacking [H.M.S.] *Little Belt*." Yet the note which introduces the relevant documents in the documentary collection would have the reader believe that the *Little Belt* fired first. Notwithstanding these complaints, Chapter 1 is a salutary reminder to Canadians that the War of 1812 did have a multiplicity of causes.

The four remaining chapters deal with the war itself. Chapters Two and Five, which illustrate the war on the North Atlantic, present 198 documents, of which 176 are American while 22 are British in origin. This is a lopsided selection, even for a collection whose purpose is to describe the U.S. Navy during the War. The twenty-two British documents are drawn from a very narrow range of sources; twelve are from Admiralty 1, Admiralty and Secretariat: Papers, three from other PRO Admiralty classes, two from General Post Office records, and five from the National Archives and Records Service. While Admiralty 1 is certainly the single most important series for the study of the Royal Navy during the War of 1812, it is an action-dominated collection. Because it consists of in-letters from serving officers, it is not always the best source for information on men or materiel. There is only one document from Admiralty 2, Admiralty and Secretariat: Out-Letters, and no items whatsoever from Admiralty 106, Navy Board Records, both series which contain significant material on the supply side of the Royal Navy's activities.

The most serious fault with *The Naval War of 1812* is the imbalance created by using British documents to describe only combat or the direct results of combat. By neglecting the available British documentation on the non-combat activities of the Royal Navy, the editor is left without a reference point to make meaningful statements about the conduct of the U.S. Navy. There is more to naval war than battle. Were the U.S. frigates stouter vessels than their Royal Navy counterparts? Were U.S. sailors better fed, better trained, or did they come from a different social class than the tars of the Royal Navy? The editor

does not present documents to illuminate these questions. Surely these questions are worth considering in a volume dedicated to "display[ing] the underpinnings of the U.S. Navy." The American sailor performed very well during the War of 1812, yet the editor does not produce documents to tell us why his naval ancestors were so capable.

The remaining two chapters of *The Naval War of 1812* deal with the Great Lakes theatre and the U.S. naval establishment on the Gulf Coast. U.S. naval operations in the Gulf of Mexico in 1812 were at best marginal. On the other hand, the operations on Lakes Ontario and Erie were very important for the conduct of the land war. The chapter on the Great Lakes theatre is important, but it does suffer from imbalance; only two of the fifty-six documents are from the British side. This is unfortunate for, although the Provincial Marine was no more than a section of the Quartermaster General's department, its very existence gave the British a decided advantage in 1812. It was the Provincial Marine's ability to move and supply General Brock's forces that allowed him to capture Detroit and later maintain his forces on the Niagara frontier. Surprisingly, the temporary ceasefire arranged by Generals Prevost and Dearborn is not included. This is very much a naval document because it greatly affected the conduct of the whole Upper Canadian campaign. The U.S. Navy made much better use of the breathing space allowed by the ceasefire than did the Provincial Marine. "Sea power," to use Captain Mahan's phrase, had a more direct impact on the northern land campaign than it did on any other theatre of war in 1812, yet this fact is not reflected in *The Naval War of 1812*.

Most of the complaints made by this reviewer about *The Naval War of 1812* have to do with the lack of British documentation. This is not meant as an attack on nationalistic grounds. This volume presents a very distorted view of the naval war, and the cause is more than just mere lack of space. The real problem is the whole concept of using an abbreviated set of documents to illustrate a naval war and one navy's place in that conflict. Without the catholicity of *The Naval Documents of the American Revolution* project, a selected series of documents on an ideological campaign such as the War of 1812 cannot but further call into question the legitimacy of publishing historical documents. The most useful types of document collections are those which fit Hattendorf's "documents relating to a single individual," and "manuscripts of book length such as journals, diaries, letterbooks, [and] treatises." An edited collection of Commodore Chauncey's correspondence would make a worthwhile contribution to the literature on the naval aspects of the War of 1812. As a collection of documents on a specific theme, *The Naval War of 1812*, because of its ideological purpose, cannot be considered a well-rounded sampling of the primary sources available for the study of the naval side of the War of 1812.

Notes

- 1 At its October 1986 meeting, the [United States] National Historic Publications and Records Commission recommended grants for the publication of historical documents totalling more than one million dollars (U.S.). These grants ranged from \$31,000 for *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* to \$118,817 for the *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress of the United States of America, March 4, 1789-March 4, 1791*. See "Commission Meets at New Maryland Hall of Records," *Annotation: The Newsletter of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission*, 24, no. 3 (December 1986), 1 and 6. For the sorry state of documentary publishing in Canada, see Laura Millar Coles, "The Decline of Documentary Publishing: The Role of English-Canadian Archives and Historical Societies in Documentary Publishing," *Archivaria* 23 (Winter 1986-87), pp. 69-85.

- 2 See, for example, Barrett Tillman, "Today's Uses of Naval History," *Naval History* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1988), pp. 9-13.
- 3 Two of the most prominent historians of British sea power, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Arthur Marder, are Americans. See John Keegan, "Why are Britain's Great Naval Historians Americans?" *Naval History* 1 (April 1987), pp. 7-11.
- 4 See, for example, S.W. Roskill, ed., *Documents Relating to the Naval Air Service*, Navy Records Society, vol. 113 (London, 1969); R.G. Marsden, ed., *Documents Relating to the Law and Custom of the Sea*, Navy Records Society, vols. 49-50 (London, 1915-16); and R.D. Merriman, ed., *Queen Anne's Navy: Documents Concerning the Administration of the Navy of Queen Anne*, Navy Records Society, vol. 103 (London, 1963).
- 5 G.G. Harris, ed., *Trinity House of Deptford*, Transactions, 1609-35. London Record Society, vol. 19 (London, 1983).
- 6 For *The Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, the U.S. Naval Historical Center's definition of a naval document is any "documentation bearing upon the regular naval forces on both sides, state navies, privateers, merchant shipping, logistics, diplomacy as relating to the naval/ maritime aspects of the conflict, and operations on sea, lake, bay and river," as quoted in William James Morgan, "Naval Documents of the American Revolution," in *Editing Naval Documents: An Historical Appreciation*, p. 21.
- 7 The exception is the abomination UKLPR for the Public Record Office.
- 8 British prize court records are voluminous and scattered. The principal collections are: Public Record Office, High Court of Admiralty, Prize Papers, HCA 32; National Archives of Canada, Vice Admiralty Court, Halifax, RG 8 IV; and Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia, Court of Vice Admiralty, RG 40.