

## **Circuits of Knowledge: The Royal Navy and the Caribbean, 1756 – 1815**

### Aims and objectives:

This project explores the ways in which officers, seamen and others connected to the Royal Navy represented and sought to make sense of the societies and places that they encountered in the course of their duty. It focuses on one particular arena of naval involvement, the British Caribbean, examining the period between the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756 and the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. This period was characterised by warfare and revolutionary upheaval in Europe, North America and the Caribbean. As Michael Duffy has demonstrated, during a prolonged and barely broken period of conflict between Britain and France, the Caribbean was a zone of vital strategic and economic importance for both sides, and many ships and thousands of personnel were deployed to the region as part of the struggle for global mastery (Duffy 1987).

Previous studies of the Royal Navy in the Caribbean during this period have tended to focus on operational matters and naval engagements. By contrast, this project aims to shed light on the social and cultural aspects of the Royal Navy's encounter with the Caribbean region. For a significant part of their time in the area, naval officers and seamen were observers and recorders of the societies in which they moved. Royal Navy personnel wrote about the Caribbean and they also mapped and drew it, resulting in a large number of letters, journals, books, charts, sketches, watercolours, caricatures and prints that survive from this period. In these different ways, the Royal Navy contributed significantly to an increasing body of European knowledge relating to the Caribbean, an area that was still relatively unknown to European readers at the beginning of the period of this study. Moreover, the circulation of that knowledge fed into metropolitan debates about the West Indies, particularly debates surrounding slavery and the slave trade. In these ways, the observations and comments of Royal Navy personnel had a considerable impact on the ways in which British people engaged with and understood the Caribbean, its institutions, people and environment.

The project will build on recent scholarship that has begun to examine the importance of imperial and Atlantic networks that bound metropole and colonies together during this period. There is a well-established body of scholarship on the maritime commercial ties that linked merchants and investors with suppliers and markets throughout the Atlantic littoral, and this has shown that slave-run sugar plantations in the Caribbean were of fundamental importance to that system (See for examples, Hancock 1997; Hornsby 2004). Historians have also begun to explore the personal and familial ties that connected people on opposite shores of the Atlantic (e.g. Pearsall 2008) and the identities and imperial careers of colonial functionaries (e.g. Lambert and Lester 2006). Much recent work has been shaped by methods and arguments proposed by cultural historians such as Kathleen Wilson and Catherine Hall, who argue that colonies and the mother country were mutually constitutive not just in terms of the circulation of commodities and people, but also culturally: the cultural identities of people in Imperial Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were defined by connections with colonies as well as by their attitudes towards these distant and 'other' places and the people who lived there (Wilson 2002; Hall 2002).

By building on this work to look at the cultural productions of the personnel of the Royal Navy in the context of global networks, this project focuses on an important and unique group of people who have hitherto been overlooked by social and cultural historians. The navy was integral to the creation and maintenance of the British Atlantic world, particularly in the Caribbean, where slaveholders depended on it for protection against foreign invasions and uprisings by enslaved people (O'Shaughnessy 2000). Moreover, naval personnel were frequent visitors to the Caribbean. Many of them travelled between several parts of the region as well as visiting other parts of the world. These career travellers were therefore in the unusual position of being able to make comparative observations about the natural environments and societies they visited and were themselves shaped and influenced by their wide-ranging experiences. Moreover, since their operational bases were located in the United Kingdom, they had strong personal, social and cultural links to the metropole. In these ways, studying the records left by those who served with the Royal Navy offers a unique opportunity to understand how Britons understood the wider world and how that world shaped Britons.

In attempting to define how Royal Navy personnel interacted with the Caribbean, the project will explore two related themes, as follows:

#### 1. The Royal Navy and Caribbean Societies:

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the societies of the British Caribbean were experiencing dramatic change in three related areas. Firstly, these societies were undergoing a process that the historian Kamau Brathwaite defined as the development of creole society. As Africans and Europeans came together in the context of slave societies, they created new, distinctively local, or 'creole' societies, the contours of which became clearly defined during the period between the American Revolution and the abolition of slavery (Brathwaite 1972). Linked to this was a second area of change: the process of 'amelioration' (Ward 1988). This included the 'improvement' of agricultural techniques and of slave management on the plantations and the re-drafting of new legal codes relating to slavery. Diana Paton has suggested that the impetus for this lay not just in responding to outside humanitarian critiques of slavery but in the desire of parts of the local elite to create a more manageable, stable and economically efficient social order in the Caribbean (Paton 2004). The decline of that local elite is the third and final key area of change. In the period covered by this project, slaveholders with property in the West Indies experienced economic difficulties and declining political influence. By the end of the Napoleonic era they faced unprecedented challenges including new forms of enslaved resistance, the ascendancy of British anti-slavery sentiment and the closure of the transatlantic slave trade (Petley 2009). This project will look at how naval personnel who visited the Caribbean interacted with the changing societies of the region and at how they responded to and reflected upon significant transformations to the region's economic status and social fabric.

As a part of this, the project will explore the strength and depth of naval officers' economic investments in the Caribbean. It will also examine the cultural attachments of all ranks of servicemen to the societies of the region, not least by building on recent work that emphasises the importance of hospitality to the local elites of the sugar islands (Burnard 2005). How important were patterns of socialising between officers

and the members of the planter class, and how did they impact on what Royal Navy personnel chose to record and circulate? Outside observers often responded negatively towards the slave societies of the Caribbean (see Yeh 2005; Hall 2002), and this project aims to explore to what extent those connected to the Royal Navy criticised white slaveholding colonists and empathised with the enslaved majorities or free coloured populations of the islands.

In the period before missionaries travelled to the Caribbean in large numbers, naval officers were important conduits of 'impartial' information about the societies and people of the region, which meant that those involved in debates about slaveholding and the slave trade frequently relied on the views and opinions of such men (McAleer 2009). Horatio Nelson was sympathetic to the slaveholding regime and was connected by marriage to the planter class of Nevis. The Reverend James Ramsay, by contrast, was appalled by what he saw of the trade in enslaved people while serving as a naval surgeon, which prompted him first to work as an Anglican curate with slave communities on St Kitts and later to write an influential essay that criticised the British slave system in the Caribbean. The role of those connected with the Royal Navy in the development of the politics of slavery during the period of the study could, therefore, provide a way for this project to pursue the aim of exploring how men and offers responded to and represented the dynamic and changing societies that they encountered while posted in the Caribbean.

## 2: The Royal Navy and the Caribbean Environment:

A second theme through which the Royal Navy's engagement with the Caribbean will be pursued is the role that naval personnel played in 'collecting', recording and interpreting the natural history, topographies, landscapes and material culture of the region. Understanding and 'improving' the natural world was central to projects of European colonial expansion. Natural history, the collecting of botanical specimens, the development of ethnographical approaches to indigenous societies, and exchanges of scientific knowledge were therefore important characteristics of European relationships with the wider world in the period (Drayton 2000; Driver 2001), and the West Indies was one of several 'biocontact zones', crucial to British imperial concerns during the period with which this project is concerned (Schiebinger 2004). Possible avenues for this project, therefore, are to explore the role of Royal Navy personnel in state-sponsored imperial projects of scientific and botanical 'improvement' and the private endeavours of officers and men involved in the consumption of books on history, natural history and science, amateur scientific research and the culture of collecting.

In its role as a mobile agent of such activities, the Royal Navy was actively involved in mapping large areas of the seabed, scoping tracts of land on Caribbean islands, and transporting botanical specimens to and from the Caribbean. During this period, for example, new varieties of sugar cane were introduced to the region and the breadfruit tree was first brought to Jamaica from Tahiti in 1793 on the HMS Providence, captained by William Bligh. Part of the possible work of this project, therefore, will be to explore how Royal Navy personnel participated in and reflected on their involvement in such bioprospecting and quests for scientific knowledge. This will provide the opportunity to study further the ways in which the region became

embedded in global maritime networks that went well beyond the Atlantic to include places such as the recently charted Pacific islands.

Separate strands of recent research have emphasised the negative impressions that outside observers had of the Caribbean climate and the connections between imperial expansion, medical knowledge and natural history (Brown, 2008; MacGregor 2007; MacKenzie 2009). Naval personnel often observed and recorded information about the climate and geography of the Caribbean, its landscape, and the hazards that the region (sometimes referred to as “The Torrid Zone”) posed to creoles and Europeans alike. Naval personnel contributed to an increase in publication on tropical diseases between 1798 and 1802, a period that coincided with a British military intervention in revolutionary St Domingue that was heavily affected by the ravages of yellow fever among European combatants. In journals, letters and travelogues, Naval personnel also observed and recorded information about wildlife, botany, and the built environment. By focussing on these themes, this project will build on recent research to provide a clearer picture of the ways in which Royal Navy officers and sailors represented and interacted with the Caribbean as well as assessing how this impacted on British metropolitan understandings and perceptions of the region.

#### Research questions:

Taking the broad aims and objectives outlined above as a starting point, the precise research questions of the PhD will be agreed with the student. There is, however, a set of prospective core questions that can be used to direct the research. These relate to each of the two key areas of inquiry that we have identified:

- How did naval officers and seamen interact with creole society in the British West Indies?
- How does an understanding of the navy’s interactions with the Caribbean help to shed light on changes that were occurring within local societies and the development of metropolitan attitudes towards the region and its inhabitants?
- What can the writing, testimony, drawings and sketches of naval observers tell us about the ways in which Britons perceived and represented tropical slave societies?
- What can the ideas, attitudes and artefacts that naval travellers formed, collected or brought back from the Caribbean tell us about patterns of information and knowledge transfer around the British world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century?

#### Proposed methodology:

This is an archive-based project that draws on extensive collections of public and private records, press accounts, published travelogues, and visual representations.

The collections of the National Maritime Museum are particularly rich in relation to the Royal Navy and its activities in the Caribbean. Potential archival sources include:

- Papers of naval personnel, e.g. papers of Sir John Thomas Duckworth (DUC/8–35); journals by Vice-Admiral Charles Stirling on the Jamaica Station (1812–13) (MSS/80/171.0; MSS/80/171.1); letters of Admiral Sir John

Borlase Warren (WAR/54); papers of John Platt on Jamaica station (PLT); papers of Sir Augustus Phillimore (PHL); journals of Admiral Charles John Austen (AUS/118–32); diary of Thomas Pruen (TRN/68/1)

- Archives relating to individual naval personnel and the relationship with the slave-holding societies of the region, e.g. correspondence relating to the Weilburg Estate owned by Sir James Douglas (1703–87), commander-in-chief of the Leeward Islands (DOU/6)
- Archives relating to individual ships, e.g. Logbook of HMS *Topaz* (BET/2)
- A range of visual material recorded by Royal Navy personnel in the Caribbean, e.g. sketchbook of Edward Pelham Brenton (PAF8399); sketchbook of James Fuller Boxer (ZBA1537–1601)
- A large collection of prints and drawings (60,000), many of which relate to the Royal Navy and its global operations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
- The Michael Graham Stewart collection of slavery-related material.

It is also expected that the student will consult additional collections at The National Archives (e.g. Admiralty records), the British Library, as well as museum archives and local records, such as the Royal Navy Museum, Portsmouth, United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, Taunton, and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

A range of contemporary published material is also available. Examples include:

Matthew Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor: Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (1834).

N. H. Nicolas (ed.), *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice-Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson* (1844–6)

George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies* (1806).

G. Rawson (ed.) *Nelson's Letters from the Leeward Islands* (1953)

Philip Wright (ed.), *Lady Nugent's Journal of her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002).

#### Timescales:

The student will be upgraded to PhD status during the second-year of the programme. It is expected that they will submit their completed thesis within three years (i.e. by 2013). During YR3 they will also be expected to give papers on their research, organise a workshop, and organise a small-scale display relating to their work at the NMM. Some of these activities will of necessity be completed/staged in what effectively be the fourth year of the programme, depending on the student's progress.

#### Plans for dissemination:

This project aims to encourage as wide a dissemination of research finding as possible. It will produce a doctoral thesis, which will be publishable in due course. The student

will also be expected to write and deliver a number of conference papers. The partner institutions run conferences and seminars at which the student will be encouraged to give papers; s/he will also be expected to offer papers at non-partner institutions. In addition, it is envisaged that the supervisors and student will organise a workshop at one of the partner institutions in which their work and that of others in the field can be constructively compared and where scholarly dialogue and debate can occur. The 'Oceans' network in the School of Humanities at Southampton would provide one obvious forum for disseminating the student's work, as would the recently established University of Southampton Strategic Research Group in Maritime Studies an inter-disciplinary group that also has strong international links with Europe and North America. It is also expected that the successful candidate will disseminate their research by organising a small-scale display at the National Maritime Museum, and by improving on-line access to the NMM's collections on the Royal Navy and the Caribbean. Finally, the student will be given every encouragement by the supervisory team to explore the wider potential of their research and to seek ways of exploiting it through academic networking, liaison with local community groups (the NMM has an impressive record of working with such groups), and engagement with schools and education authorities.

#### Expected outcomes:

The project will produce high-quality research that will contribute to knowledge in a number of different areas: Atlantic studies, Caribbean studies, maritime studies, British social and cultural history, travel, exploration, and the history of science. The research will also shed important new light on British perceptions and understanding of colonial societies, thereby provoking debate and discussion. The project is designed to impact on national and international debates about the nature of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British empire, how it was observed and recorded, and the extent to which colonies and mother country were mutually constitutive, not just in terms of the circulation of commodities and people, but also country. The proposed project will also benefit the Museum's exhibition, research, education and online programmes through providing original and relevant material. The research carried out will feed directly into the refreshment of the Museum's 'Atlantic Worlds' gallery. The Museum's commitment to the creative combination of scholarly research within the context of the public engagement with history means that this academic work has the potential to feed into programmes, exhibitions and resources that will reach many people who might not otherwise engage with the topic.

#### References:

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- Richard Drayton, *Natures Government: Science, British Imperialism and the Improvement of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
- Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
- Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830 – 1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).
- Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2007).

- John McAleer, “Eminent service”: war, slavery and the politics of public recognition in the British Caribbean and the Cape of Good Hope, c. 1782-1807’, *Mariner's Mirror* 95 (2009), pp. 33-51.
- Christer Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica: Colonial Society and Culture during the Era of Abolition* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009).
- Londa Scheibinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).