

1999

## Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772-1853

Tony Johnstone-Burt OBE

Roger Morriss

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Johnstone-Burt, Tony OBE and Morriss, Roger (1999) "Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772-1853," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 52 : No. 4 , Article 25.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol52/iss4/25>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

the North to dispatch its best ships to hunt them down, thus taking them away from the strategically more important blockade duty. The problem with the Southern commerce-raiding campaign was that there was no protected forward base to refit and repair ships, like the U.S. Navy was to have at Ulithi during World War II. Instead, the Confederate raiders were invariably forced into neutral European ports, from which powerful Union ships waited for them to put to sea to be picked off.

The South was much more successful with its underwater innovations, which had more to do with mining than with submarine craft carrying explosives. Such warfare bordered at the time on illegality, according to the international rules of war—a fact that did not seem to bother the Confederates. It was in the area of underwater torpedoes (mines) that the South had its greatest success, sinking the powerful first-class ship USS *Tecumseh* at the battle of Mobile Bay and causing no small amount of panic on the part of the U.S. Navy as it struggled to overcome this particular threat (which, incidentally, it still does to this day).

As Luraghi notes in his conclusion, despite the South's limited success at commerce raiding and submarine warfare, it was never able to make up for its huge gap in industrial infrastructure and overall insufficient maritime experience and tradition. These, more than anything else, proved to be the South's ultimate undoing. In fact, Northern superiority was so taken for granted, even during the early years of the war, that President Abraham Lincoln allowed the Italian navy to purchase from the U.S.

Navy two powerful warships built in 1862 in New York.

Luraghi chronicles every phase of Confederate naval strategy throughout the four-year struggle. It is a powerful history and will be referred to for years to come. Finally, thanks also should be given to Paolo Coletta, for his superb and nearly flawless translation.

CHARLES NEIMEYER  
Naval War College

---

Morriss, Roger. *Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772–1853*. Studies in Maritime History, ed. William N. Still, Jr. Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1998. 338pp. \$39.95

Cockburn: a swashbuckling role model for Patrick O'Brien's Jack Aubrey, or an intransigent obstacle to progress that assumed Berlin Wall proportions? Who could fail to be intrigued by an insight of the man who was taught by Nelson, described by the Americans as "the *savage* Cockburn" (after he had attacked and burned Washington), who spent a year with Napoleon as his custodian in St. Helena, and then seventeen years in politics? Today we are bombarded with images through the media of characters who are either idolised or vilified for having achieved barely half of Cockburn's impact on international and domestic affairs, and rarely in such contrasting capacities.

Presented with the task of reflecting a period of such radical social and political change as that between the American War of Independence and the Crimean War, Morriss, currently at the

University of Exeter Centre for Maritime Studies and University College London, has chosen to use Cockburn's life as the lens through which to view these changes. However, his task is made more complex by the diverse range of contemporary perceptions of the man. On one hand, he was one of Nelson's captains, at the age of twenty-five in command of HMS *La Minerve* at the battle of Cape St. Vincent in 1797, and after the War of 1812 the United States of America he was acclaimed as a war hero; yet on the other hand, later in his career he was condemned as an autocratic and administrative tyrant, the personification of reactionary conservatism and resistance to change.

Through meticulous research using primary source material at the National Maritime Museum in London, where he is curator, Morriss skillfully peels away the layers of prejudice and presents his data as objectively as possible. His analysis deals with Cockburn's career in two distinct phases, separated by his role as governor of St. Helena in charge of Napoleon. He concentrates initially on his twenty-two years of operations at sea before focusing on his significant impact at the Admiralty and in Parliament. As one of Admiral Samuel Hood's lieutenants in HMS *Victory* and then as a junior captain under the tutelage of Nelson, Cockburn could not have asked for more rigorous training. Nelson became increasingly dependent on this aggressive, determined, and ambitious young captain throughout 1795–97, leaving his squadron in Cockburn's charge in the Gulf of Genoa to conduct what we now call embargo or maritime interdiction

operations. Described by Nelson as having "zeal, ability and courage which shine conspicuous on every occasion," Cockburn won Nelson's trust so completely that the latter commented, "We so exactly think alike on points of service that if your mind tells you it is right, there can hardly be a doubt but I must approve." Morriss makes it clear that at the end of this period Cockburn had also become particularly adept politically and diplomatically.

That, in no small way, contributed to Cockburn's selection by the secretary of state, Lord Bathurst, as the individual best suited to take Napoleon and his entourage on the ten-week voyage to St. Helena, establish them in captivity, and ensure that there was no repeat of the escape from Elba. Morriss's handling of this episode is the jewel in the crown of his biography. In describing Napoleon, he paints a portrait of a supremely arrogant man who had been utterly convinced of his own invincibility for two decades and who now was being forced to come to terms with his defeat. Simultaneously, he reflects how Cockburn made the transition from dealing with a world filled with the cacophony of blazing broadsides, bloody carnage, and displays of raw courage to one of psychological warfare, a battle of wills against one of the greatest tactical minds of the century, for whom any form of subjugation was anathema.

In his coverage of the latter half of Cockburn's career, Morriss highlights his transition to the command of the North America and West Indies station, Admiralty Board membership, and then politics, as he coped with the pressures and momentum behind technological change (the introduction of steam and

the propeller) and dramatic administrative and political reform. What shine through in this period are Cockburn's uncompromising standards; his loyalty to his service, its officers and men; and his advocacy of advancement based on performance, not patronage.

Morriss's analysis of this period will appeal to the full range of this journal's readership. By using Cockburn's life as the mechanism with which to interpret so significant and complex a period of social and political history, he gives it clarity and an original perspective. Drawing parallels between Cockburn's world and our own, Naval War College students will note the continuing importance of nurturing officers with ability and flair, capable of excelling operationally, independent in thought and action, and having the breadth of vision and intelligence to contribute on an equal basis with administrators and politicians in the world of strategy and policy.

In a society that revolved around patronage for advancement, Cockburn stands out as the perfect example of a professional who committed himself unreservedly to sixty years of public service, a man with uncompromising moral courage who judged others by his own standards of morality and self-discipline. However, as Morriss readily acknowledges, because Cockburn kept his public and private life strictly separate, he is unable to provide a glimpse of the admiral's family and the personal cost of such all-consuming dedication. In our prurient and salacious world, access to such knowledge of public figures has become second nature, and no less would have been expected of "the man who burned the

White House." With his exemplary personal and professional example, his decision to remain enigmatic over his private life is, perhaps, another lesson for us all.

TONY JOHNSTONE-BURT, OBE  
Captain, Royal Navy

---

Barbera, Henry. *The Military Factor in Social Change*. Vol. 2., *The State as Revolution*. Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction, 1998. 338pp. \$49.95

Barbera's stated objective in writing this book was to provide case studies in support of the theoretical propositions offered in his earlier volume. He contends that the state, in form and function, was evident in societies preceding the modern state formation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This volume provides substantiation for this hypothesis. In addition, the richly detailed case studies of Attika, Sicily, and Prussia help fill the void for political scientists whose grasp of historical forms of state organization is spotty.

The title of the book is a bit misleading. Rather than the single-factor explanation implied—military factors as related to social change—the author explores complex social change, *including* the military dimension, to explain social changes underlying early state formation. Barbera maintains that non-linear change from prestate (provincial society) to state (political society) was initiated by threats from neighboring societies. The response to threat was an adaptive, natural reordering of social, political, economic, and military life. In each of these areas, this restructuring