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Professional Reading

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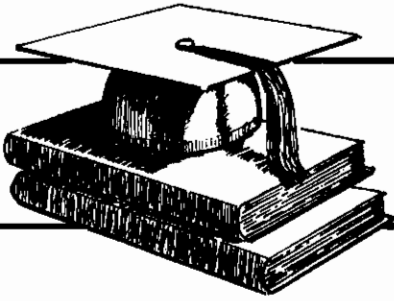
Geoffrey Bennett

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PROFESSIONAL READING

Bennett, Geoffrey. *The Battle of Trafalgar*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1977. 256pp.

Captain Bennett is well-known to readers of British naval history as a writer specializing in detailed accounts of battles in the First and Second World Wars and as a biographer of Nelson and Beresford. Having dealt with the battles of Jutland, Falkland Islands, the River Plate, and the loss of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, Bennett now turns his attention to a narrative of the most famous battle in English naval history. The story of Trafalgar is an old one that has been told many times, but it is a story worth retelling and Captain Bennett has done justice to the tale. The book may be recommended as an authoritative and accurate account of the battle written by an author thoroughly familiar with the technical aspect of naval affairs.

The specialist in seventeenth and eighteenth century naval history will have some reservations about a number of statements in the first two chapters. The background which the author provides on the general history of the Royal Navy and the essay on "fighting sail" contain a number of inaccurate or poorly chosen descriptions. For example, it seems inappropriate to describe the Royal Navy as "cutting its infant teeth" in the Anglo-Dutch wars. It is clearly debatable whether the war of 1689-97 is accurately described as the War of the English Succession, and it is a gross oversimplification to state that the Trafalgar Campaign had its genesis

in the storming of the Bastille. On the technical side, experts may well argue that a square rigged ship could not sail as close as 50° off the wind. Six points off the wind would seem more accurate for ships in the period under discussion. In general, the military and political background of the war is weak. What is mentioned shows no new insights into the broader significance of the battle and there is no evidence that the latest scholarship on the encompassing aspects of the period has been used. Bennett has confined himself to the naval side of the story. But one must also evaluate carefully his claim to have told the story "anew, not from the many versions published, but from contemporary records." Oddly enough, there is not a single reference to an archival source and the select bibliography lists among the standard secondary sources, the well-known documents published by the Navy Records Society, Desbriere, the Nelson letters, and the 1913 "Report of the Admiralty Commission to Inquire into the Tactics of Trafalgar."

Captain Bennett has given us, not a new view based on wider research or newly found material, but a reexamination of old evidence. The result does not significantly alter the accepted view of the battle. However, the book does correct and reassess a number of details as well as provide a well-written summary of the traditional view of the battle.

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