

Boys at Sea

Young Nelsons: Boy Sailors during the Napoleonic Wars

By D.A.B.Ronald.
Osprey, 2009. 304 pages.
30 colour illustrations + b/w in text.
Hardcover. \$25.95.

Review by Brian Southam.

This book has much to engage readers of Jane Austen, and it holds a special appeal to those with an interest in the naval career of William Price, the young sailor of *Mansfield Park*, and in the lives of Francis and Charles Austen, the two sailor brothers who served the length of the Napoleonic Wars and far beyond. However, as the title of Ronald's book tells us, the focus of *Young Nelsons* is on "Boy Sailors," holding our attention to the sailors' recruitment, entry, and early years in the navy, with an emphasis upon their experience of war and their performance, sometimes heroic, in the Nelson tradition.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first book to examine this area, and its particular value lies in the mass of documentary evidence collected here from naval memoirs recounting the experiences of individual sailors, very often stories of endurance and suffering as these youngsters, some of them as young as 10 or 11, came to terms with the rites of passage (often involving

bullying and the theft of their precious possessions) and the rough and tumble and hardship endured by novices at sea; all this graphically before us in vivid contemporary illustrations.

Young Nelsons also provides a valuable account of the work of the Marine Society, a charitable body largely dedicated to finding poor and destitute boys, clothing them, providing them with some rudimentary education, and supplying them to the Navy. During the period of the Napoleonic Wars, this amounted to five or six hundred a year. On board ship, these boys would often be employed as officers' servants; and in battle they were used as "powder-monkeys," bringing cartridges for the guns up from the powder magazine far below the gun decks.

The other class of boys, usually joining their ships at 12 or 13 under the patronage of the Captain, were the "young gentlemen" designated as "Captains' servants," destined to become officers in six years' time and learning their seamanship at sea. A very small number (including the Austen boys) joined their ships already part-trained after two to three years at the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth.

The experiences of these boys, both the "young gentlemen" and those from the Marine Society, are richly represented. Yet, somewhat strangely, the author fails to provide a good deal of basic information: that, for example, those under 15 were rated as "Boy Third Class," those under 18 were "Boy Second Class," and those on the officer route were, from 1794, known as "Boy First Class or Volunteer Class 1;" and that Admiralty Regulations specified the number of second and third class boys to be carried in ships rated according to the number of guns: a First Rate with 100+ guns and a company of around 850 would include 13 boys second class and 19 third class, down to a Sixth Rate with 22 guns including 6 boys second class and 10 third class.

For JASNA readers, a more serious weakness lies in the author's misinterpretation of the past—for example, the suggestion that Francis' choice

of a naval career was the occasion for a family conference and at odds with the religious character of a clergyman's household. In reality, there is unlikely to have been any such conference, nor any discomfort at Francis' choice. It was customary for the eldest son to follow his father in a clerical career, just as James did, and for the younger sons to earn their own way in one of the professions, among which, for clerical families, the Navy was a favourite choice. As for Jane Austen herself and Cassandra, Ronald supposes that their marriageability was bound up with the success or failure of the sailor brothers to win a fortune in prize-money, whereas the real issue was not the size, if anything, of their dowries but the absence of suitable husbands, Cassandra's hopes having been dashed in 1797 by the death of her fiancé Thomas Fowle and Jane never having met anyone worthy of her.

All-in-all, this is a book which calls for cautious reading. The quoted memoirs and recollections of the boys themselves are the true traces of history, touching and sometimes distressing. But the author's commentary is not always to be trusted, least of all when he casts a tone of false familiarity over the great naval figures of the past, referring to them by their Christian names, Admiral Lord Thomas Cochrane appearing in page after page as "Thomas." A further problem for the reader unversed in naval language is the extensive nautical terminology that should have been explained *in situ* or by way of a glossary.

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