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Maritime Power and the Struggle for Freedom: Naval Campaigns that Shaped the World, 1788-1851

Peter Padfield
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"Maritime supremacy is the key which unlocks most, if not all, large questions of modern history … how and why we—the Western democracies—are as we are." This is the author's bold thesis, first advanced in *Maritime Supremacy and the Opening of the Western Mind*, which examined naval history from 1588 to 1782. Now, he carries his argument through to the mid-nineteenth century.

It's a sweeping assertion, but Padfield is well qualified to evaluate it: a leading naval historian, he is the author of twenty-two books about the sea, including nonfiction, biography, and novels. He is equally at home with battle tactics, grand strategy, diplomacy, and economics, and the result is a fascinating overview that combines detailed accounts of such battles as Camperdown, the Nile, and Trafalgar with a more general narrative of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the War of 1812.

Contrasting Britain's trade-oriented society with the autocratic system of France, he shows how a relatively democratic merchant class bested Napoleon's despotism, largely through economic growth. While the French bankrupted themselves to pay for continental wars, the British not only held their own but actually expanded trade throughout the period, thanks mainly to the Royal Navy, which protected the British Isles from invasion, kept the sea lanes open, and blockaded France. This in turn allowed England to intervene on the continent with a comparatively small land force, as in Wellington's Peninsular Campaign, avoiding the ruinous cost of Napoleon's enormous armies. By 1815, when Waterloo put an end to the wars, Britain was firmly established as the world's premier power.

Padfield provides a concise chronicle of the French Revolution and Napoleon's rise and fall, as well as a series of closely observed accounts of key naval battles. In terms of personalities, his main focus is on Nelson and Napoleon, but he offers vignettes of many other important figures, as well. His overall argument is persuasive: a merchant class pursuing individual interests produced both a flexible, flourishing economy and a relatively free society

where democracy could take root under the protection of a powerful navy. (He extends this idea to the young United States, although the ultimate rise of American sea power and economic clout falls somewhat outside the scope of this book.) A concluding chapter covers the years from 1815 to 1851; perhaps inevitably it feels a bit sketchy after the closely reasoned pages that have gone before, but it too is suggestive, if not definitive.

Illustrations and maps, a glossary, extensive notes, a substantial bibliography, and an index complete this first-rate book, which belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in naval or European history. Highly recommended.