

## XII.—COLLINGWOOD'S CAPTAIN—TWO LETTERS

*Frank Staniforth*

Two letters found in a first copy of W. Clark Russell's biography of Admiral Lord Collingwood (published 1891) acquired some months ago by the writer, led to an interesting series of inquiries into the career and character of a companion-in-arms of Collingwood, who, like the Admiral, was born in Northumberland—Captain Edward Rotheram C.B.

The letters were written by Vice-Admiral H. B. Woollcombe<sup>1</sup> to the editor of the then *Army and Navy Gazette*<sup>2</sup> supporting an appeal to raise funds to erect a memorial over the grave of Capt. Rotheram who is buried in the churchyard of the village of Bildeston, near Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk.

In the first letter (undated) Admiral Woollcombe wrote :

“ Dear Sir,

“ I enclose a letter from the Rector of Bildeston (Suffolk) which speaks for itself. I want to raise about £50-0-0 to place a Memorial Stone or Cross, with a suitable inscription, over the brave old captain's grave, who so splendidly took the flagship of Collingwood 'The Royal Sovereign' into action at the Battle of Trafalgar. I am not asking for large subscriptions. Could you insert in your paper the Notice—or an improved one—which I have written on the other side.

Yrs. faithfully,  
H. B. Woollcombe  
Vice Admiral ”

<sup>1</sup> Vice-Admiral Henry Bedford Woollcombe died at his residence, 20 Longridge Road, South Kensington. Born 1831, entered the Navy 1845, and saw active service in many parts of the world. He retired as Captain in 1882 through ill-health. Promoted Rear-Admiral on the retired list in 1883 and Vice-Admiral in 1888—*The Times*, February 1904.

<sup>2</sup> *The Army and Navy Gazette* founded 1860, merged with the *Naval and Military Record* 1936 to become the *United Services Review*. Ceased publication about 1950.

And the Admiral's suggested notice for insertion in the *Army and Navy Gazette* was:

#### AN UNMARKED GRAVE

In the churchyard of Bildeston Church, Suffolk, lies buried Capt. E. Rotheram, R.N., C.B., Flag Captain to Vice Admiral Collingwood at Trafalgar, who so splendidly took his ship *The Royal Sovereign* into action on that glorious day, October 21st, 1805.

Subscriptions will be received by Messrs S. Hallett, c/o 7 St Martin's Place, Trafalgar Square, S.W., or by Vice Admiral Woollcombe, 20 Longridge Road, S. Kensington, which will be employed to mark the grave by a suitable cross (or headstone) carrying a simple inscription to this fine old sailor.

The second letter<sup>3</sup> dated 6th November, 1891, addressed to Captain C. N. Robinson, R.N., presumably the editor of the *Army and Navy Gazette*, reads:

"My dear Sir,

Very many thanks for your letter received too late last night to be answered.

I enclose the only photo—an untouched one—I at present possess. Only 30s. is due to me for the Rotheram memorial.

I am and have been for many weeks a prisoner in the house or I should have called at your office.

Yrs. faithfully.

H. B. Woollcombe

P.S. I have paid Messrs Sanders and Co."

A stone was eventually placed over the captain's grave and reference to the *Army and Navy Gazette*<sup>4</sup> in the British Museum newspaper library shows that a prime mover in the operation seems to have been the then Rector of Bildeston.

A visit to Bildeston Church (September 1963) revealed

<sup>3</sup> A third letter in the book would seem to indicate that the Capt Robinson mentioned by Admiral Woollcombe was the editor of the *Army and Navy Gazette*.

<sup>4</sup> *Army and Navy Gazette*, November 7, 1891.

not only a gravestone (near the gateway into the churchyard on the south side of the church) in good condition, although the lettering is beginning to fill in, but in the church itself, a memorial tablet on the south wall near the chancel.

Mrs. Eleanor M. Warner, daughter of Admiral Woollcombe has been kind enough to send the writer some details of her father's career. She adds, also, that she believes her father always considered that Rotheram had not been too well treated by Collingwood and he did not feel it right that the grave of an "officer who had served his country so well should have no memorial". This reference is particularly interesting in view of the stories of disagreement between Collingwood and Rotheram before the Battle of Trafalgar which even found a place in Southey's *Life of Nelson*.<sup>5</sup>

Rotheram was born in Hexham in 1753<sup>6</sup> the second son of a local doctor Dr John Rotheram<sup>7</sup> who in 1760 moved into Newcastle upon Tyne where he became physician to the infirmary in 1771. Edward's brother John, became Professor of Natural Philosophy at St. Andrews University.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Southey in his *Life of Nelson* writes:

Collingwood delighted at being the first in the heat of the fire and knowing the feelings of his commander and old friend (Nelson) turned to his captain and exclaimed "Rotheram, what would Nelson give to be here".

Both these brave officers, perhaps at this moment thought of Nelson with gratitude, for a circumstance which had occurred on the preceding day. Admiral Collingwood with some of the captains having gone on board *Victory* to receive instructions, Nelson inquired where his captain was? And was told in reply that they were not on good terms with each other. "Terms" said Nelson "Good Terms with each other?" Immediately he sent a boat for Captain Rotheram, led him to Collingwood and saying "Look yonder at the enemy" bade them shake hands like Englishmen.

<sup>6</sup> *The Trafalgar Roll*, R. H. MacKenzie; *Dict. of Nat. Biog.*; *History of Northumberland* (1896) Vol II. (although this gives the place of burial as Bidleston, Sussex, not Suffolk). *Richardson's Table Book*, November 2, 1830; *Men of Mark Twixt Tyne and Tweed*, Welford, etc. The entry in Hexham parish registers records the baptism on December 27, 1753: "Edward, son of Dr Rotheram".

<sup>7</sup> John Rotheram son of Caleb Rotheram D.D. Born Kendal 1719. Educated University of Edinburgh. Practice at Hexham, Newcastle 1760 in practice in Westgate. Succeeded Dr Askew as Physician to Newcastle Infirmary, 1771. Had a place in the founding of Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society where he lectured. President of Newcastle Philosophical and Medical Society. Died March 18, 1787, at his home in Westgate Street. Commemorated on a memorial tablet in Hexham Abbey—*Men of Mark Twixt Tyne and Tweed*, Welford.

Edward received his education from his father and at the Newcastle school of Dr Charles Hutton the mathematician. He first went to sea in a collier—obviously a Tyne collier (Collingwood had something to say about this, as referred to later in these notes) and he transferred to the Navy in 1777, entering the service as a seaman.

It was not unknown even in those days for a seaman to rise to commissioned rank although it would not be easy, but to reach flag rank on the flagship of the second-in-command at Trafalgar, to receive the C.B. and to carry one of the banners at Nelson's funeral must, in any age, be counted outstanding. But how did it come about that the son of, by all accounts, a successful medical man occupying a prominent position in the city should go to sea in a Tyne collier? It was a hard, rough existence, not at all the sort of life in which one would expect to find the educated son of upper middle class parents.

The normal method of entry to the Navy in those days for a youngster seeking a career as an officer was to find some relative or friend, who would take him into his own ship and thus start him under useful patronage, on the way to the quarter deck. This was the system, for example, used by both Collingwood and Nelson to enter the service. With the date of Rotheram's birth fixed at 1753 he transferred to the Navy at the age of 24, an age at which most patronage entrants had already gained their first commission. Six years service at sea and to be aged not less than 20 was the regulation requirement for promotion to lieutenant. It is a pity there is no record of the age at which Rotheram joined the colliers for that could have provided some clue as to the reason. Nevertheless, in *Men of Mark Twixt Tyne and Tweed* it is suggested that he "evinced a marked preference for navigation, was brought up to a seafaring life on board one of the colliers".

An alternative method of entry for future officers was introduced by Samuel Pepys during his tenure at the Admiralty. This was for the applicant to secure nomination

as a King's Letter Volunteer, at an age not below 13. The volunteers were placed aboard ships carrying a schoolmaster and after a few years became midshipmen. Under this system also, a volunteer might enter the service as an officer's "servant" or "follower", and the Trafalgar Roll records the names of several officers who reached the quarter deck by this means. It is within the realm of possibility that Rotheram entered the service in this way, for he became a midshipman within his first year. The term "servant" had the interpretation "apprentice" and thus a captain's "servant" went to sea to be taught his seamanship and to be brought up in the captain's profession of a sea officer.<sup>8</sup> The first requisite, of course, was to find the officer willing to accept the apprentice and then to find the necessary cash.

Finally, it might be considered whether the Press Gang played any part in Rotheram joining the Navy. The usual source of recruits for the crews were the courts, the prisons and the Press Gang, although volunteer recruiting drives were organised in the ports in times of emergency and bounties offered. Even to be impressed for a man possessing useful knowledge and education, might not be too great a handicap to be overcome in seeking promotion. At least one officer who fought at Trafalgar was an impressed man.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is a clue which may throw some light on the question for in December, 1803 Lord St Vincent was writing to Lord Elcho to say that he was sorry that he could not find a ship for Captain Rotheram nor could encourage an "immediate expectation" of one. Thus, it might be inferred that Francis, Lord Elcho (1749-1808), M.P. for Haddington Burghs from 1780 to 1787, was Rotheram's patron so far as the Navy was concerned, for St Vincent writes: "He (Rotheram) is certainly an officer of merit and the interest Yr Ldp. takes in his fortunes will incline me to give him employ-

<sup>8</sup> For example, Rear-Admiral Baron Jeffrey de Rangersfield first went to sea with Collingwood in *Mediator* in April 1783 and was listed as "Captain's servant". He became A.B. two years later, midshipman in 1786.

<sup>9</sup> John Quilliam, First Lieut. on *Victory* 1805, promoted captain October same year; impressed on the Isle of Man. Died 1829.

ment when I can do it consistently with prior engagements . . .”<sup>10</sup> And, in fact, a year later Rotheram became Flag Captain to Collingwood in *Dreadnought*.

The dates of Rotheram’s naval service are well established. Joining in 1777, within the year he became midshipman, then master’s mate (the master was responsible for navigation) thanks, no doubt, to his knowledge of navigation. In April 1780, he was in the *Barfleur* under Admiral Barrington; on October 13 the same year he was acting lieutenant in *Monarch*, one of the ships sent to the West Indies with Sir Samuel (later Viscount) Howe and he fought at Martinique, Chesapeake and St. Kitts.

When in April, 1783, *Monarch* returned home to England Rotheram was confirmed as lieutenant. He was senior lieutenant in *Culloden* (as the inscription on his gravestone records) at the famous victory by Howe on the Glorious First of June. Here he came into some prominence, and it may well have been his first real contact with Collingwood, who was flag captain to Rear-Admiral Bowyer in *Barfleur*.

After the battle *Culloden*, under Captain Isaac Schomberg, had some difficulty in keeping her station and she was hailed by *Barfleur* and told by Collingwood, on Bowyer’s order, to “drop into her station and preserve the line exactly as she could”. Feeling in *Culloden* may have been a little strained. Earlier she had been told by Howe to make more sail; then the *Invincible* complained she was too far ahead; now Bowyer told her to keep out of the way. On May 31 the day before the battle two men on *Culloden* were flogged for fighting—“Punished Richard Alfred and Dan Malone with 18 lashes for fighting” says the log. Rotheram must have been concerned with all these events as senior lieutenant.

In the battle *Culloden*’s losses were but two killed and five wounded and Schomberg did not receive the gold medal

<sup>10</sup> *Letters of Lord St Vincent*, ed Bonner-Smith, Navy Records Society.

struck for officers after the victory.<sup>11</sup> Before the year was out *Culloden* had a mutiny on board although by that time Schomberg had left her. She could not have been a particularly happy ship.

But Rotheram did distinguish himself in some measure after the battle. When the French ship *Vengeur* was left a battered wreck Rotheram went from *Culloden* to take possession of her and to try and take her in tow. An eyewitness of the incident Rear-Admiral Griffiths (who was fourth lieutenant on *Culloden*) wrote to Thomas Carlyle:

The *Vengeur* totally dismasted, going off before the wind, five sail of the line came up with her, *Culloden* and *Alfred* two of them. Her colours down, Lieut Richard Deschamps, fourth of the *Alfred*, took possession of her. The next man on board was the *Culloden*'s Lieut Rotheram. . . . Deschamps went up the side and Rotheram got in at the lower deck port, saw that the ship was sinking and went to the quarter deck. I am not positive which boat got first on board. Rotheram returned (to *Culloden*) with Captain Renaudin (of *Vengeur*) and his son and one man; and reported her state whereupon other boats were sent. . . . I personally heard him report to Captain Schomberg the *Vengeur*'s state: That he could not place a two foot rule in any direction, he thought, that would not touch two shotholes. . . . I am not certain which boat took possession and I gave it to *Alfred* because there arises so much silly squabbling on these trifles. But from Rotheram taking the Captain (Renaudin) it seems probable *Culloden*'s boat was first. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Rotheram's action in realising the *Vengeur* was sinking was credited with helping to save many of the crew.

After the action Rotheram was promoted commander (July, 1794) and from 1795 to 96 commanded the *Camel*, a store ship in the Mediterranean. From the following year until 1800 he commanded the *Hawke* in the North Sea and the West Indies. In June of that year he was made acting

<sup>11</sup> Neither did Collingwood much to his annoyance. However, he did receive his medal later, following his protests.

<sup>12</sup> *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* by Thomas Carlyle, Vol. VI, 1869. Carlyle's essay was a reply to French claims that the long and bitter fight between *Brunswick* and *Vengeur* was a victory for the navy of the French Republic.

captain of the *Unite*. Next, he was appointed acting captain of *Lapwing* by Lord Hugh Seymour "Vice-Admiral of the Blue and C in C of Barbadoes, Leeward Islands and seas adjacent", on July 12, 1800, and the record of this appointment is to be seen in the Public Record Office.

He was confirmed in the rank of captain later the same year when he brought the *Lapwing* home. Then, presumably, came the interval—by no means unusual in a naval officer's life at that time—when he was obviously without a ship and when, no doubt, his application was being urged by Lord Elcho, as already noted. However, by December, 1804, he had joined Collingwood in *Dreadnought* as flag captain and it is possible that Lord Elcho's approaches to St. Vincent thus had their eventual effect.

When Collingwood as second-in-command of the fleet transferred his flag to *Royal Sovereign* before Trafalgar Rotheram went with him and these two Northumbrians must have been a formidable pair of officers. Both had considerable experience of battle, both had served under renowned naval tacticians, both had become used to handling men.

W. Clark Russell writes that Rotheram was a man of "a dryness of wit that gained largely in point and effect from the Northumbrian burr in his articulation"; in fact, a Northumbrian of the type many of us still delight to converse with. Reported as being particularly cool under fire, Rotheram had the suggestion made to him during the battle that he should wear something less conspicuous for the enemy's marksmen.<sup>13</sup> In this instance it was an unusually big cocked hat resplendent with fresh gold lace. "Let me alone" was the reply. "I have always fought in a cocked hat and I always will."<sup>14</sup>

Strong characters, no matter ties of respect and discipline, often clash and the story of the disagreement between Collingwood and Rotheram before the battle now has its

<sup>13</sup> Similar stories are told of Collingwood and Nelson.

<sup>14</sup> *The Bellerophon*, Edward Fraser, 1909.



R. 178 *Bellerophon* off-shant  
 October 30<sup>th</sup> 1806

Sir

I received your letter of the 23<sup>d</sup> instant informing me of Paul St Vincent having stated to my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that owing to the unskilfulness or negligence of the Officers of the *Bellerophon* several Topmasts had been carried away, and acquainting me with their Lordships intention of charging the value of the above Topmasts against my Wages unless I can account satisfactorily for the repeated accidents alluded to.

and I am Sir

Your most  
 Obedient

Humble Servant

Jas Rotheram



Parts of a letter written by Rotheram in 1806

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place in history<sup>5</sup>. And in his published letters referring to Trafalgar and in his own account of the battle, Collingwood makes no mention of Rotheram, although he finds time to praise at least one other Newcastle man.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in a letter written on August 26 before the battle Collingwood is scathing in his comments on Rotheram.

From *Dreadnought*, Collingwood wrote:

"I have a diligent young man for my secretary (W. R. Cosway) and Clavell, my lieutenant, is the spirit of the ship; but such a captain (Rotheram), such a stick, I wonder very much how such people get forward. I should (I firmly believe) with his nautical ability and knowledge and exertion, have been a bad lieutenant at this day. Was he brought up in the Navy? For he has very much the style of the coal trade about him, except that they are good seamen."<sup>16</sup>

It is hardly conceivable that Collingwood could not know the background of Rotheram, a man from his own city of Newcastle (both presumably recognisable by their Northumbrian burr, if nothing else). This is a remarkable comment for an admiral to make about his own flag captain; after all, he could exercise some choice in making this appointment. And it fits badly with Collingwood's reputed preference for Tynesiders in his ships' companies.<sup>17</sup>

And two years later Collingwood was referring to Rotheram in a letter written from *Ocean* on June 1, 1807:

"I was sorry to hear of poor Rotheram who, though I think him a stupid man, I was in hope that he would have gone on in

<sup>15</sup> Midshipman Granville Thompson, born in Newcastle. Twice wounded at Trafalgar on board *Royal Sovereign*. Collingwood wrote him in praise of his conduct under fire.

<sup>16</sup> *Correspondence of Admiral Lord Collingwood*, ed Hughes, Navy Records Society.

<sup>17</sup> Being particularly connected with Newcastle I engaged my friends there to use their influence with the seamen, which they did so effectively that near fifty men entered. . . . On the assurance given by these gentlemen that they were to serve in the *Prince* (Collingwood's ship). Only three of the number have been joined the ship: some, I understand, have been drafted with other ships, several remain unappointed—*Correspondence of Admiral Lord Collingwood*.

the ship I put him, which I believe was the only chance of being in a ship.<sup>18</sup>

All this apart, *Royal Sovereign* was fought superbly in the battle and Rotheram received his gold medal.<sup>19</sup> He was sent by Collingwood to take over the command of the *Bellerophon* to escort the body of Nelson home and he stayed with the *Bellerophon* until 1807, a significant date if one refers to Collingwood's letter above. During this time *Bellerophon* served as flagship of one of the divisions of the Channel Fleet in the Bay of Biscay and the Baltic.

But Rotheram had little good fortune in *Bellerophon*. He became embroiled in correspondence with the Admiralty in October, 1806, over the question of payment for the loss of topmasts which were carried away. He was informed that the loss would be charged "against my wages" unless he could account satisfactorily for the repeated accidents. In a letter to the Admiralty (in the Public Record Office) he describes the events leading to the damage and adds "I cannot finish this letter without desiring you will apprise their Lordships I feel much hurt by these repeated accidents, and that during a long course of thirty six years experience at sea I have not seen so much damage sustained except in battle". One can only feel sorry for Rotheram in this disaster.

He was made a C.B. in 1815 at the end of the French war and was appointed an extra captain at Greenwich Hospital. He died suddenly at the home of his friend Richard Wilson, at Bildeston, on November 6, 1830 at the age of 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Correspondence of Admiral Lord Collingwood.*

<sup>19</sup> The *Santa Anna* struck to the *Royal Sovereign* . . . when her colours fell in a dejected tremble Rotheram seized Collingwood by the hand; "I congratulate you sir," he exclaimed—*Life of Admiral Collingwood*, Geoffrey Murray.