

PEPYS AND THE SEA OFFICERS

RICHARD OLLARD, M.A., F.R.S.L.

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Today, May 29th, would be dedicated, if his life had afforded a title to sanctity, to King Charles II. Up the river in Chelsea the pensioners of his splendid hospital are observing the feast of their founder with appropriate conviviality. It was his birthday. It was the day on which, amid scenes of delirious rejoicing, he re-entered London in 1660, the day, more than any other, to be celebrated as the anniversary of his Restoration. Pepys, as one of the most vivid reporters who have ever described London, whose Diary gives us, and for the Restoration period especially, the very form and pressure of the time, might at first sight offer rich material for an account of this historic day.

In fact, however, he was not among those taking part. He had stayed behind aboard the *Royal Charles* with his cousin and patron, Sir Edward Montagu, soon to be ennobled as Earl of Sandwich. He spent the morning writing letters, including one to find out how much his employer would have to pay for his institution as a Knight of the Most Honourable and Noble Order of the Garter, and after dinner on board went ashore with his master for a most agreeable and refreshing ride. From the top of Kingsdown cliffs they watched the fleet fire salutes in honour of the King's birthday and in the evening there was supper and music in the Great Cabin.

Pepys was coming to the end of the first of two long periods in his life spent in a warship at close quarters with the sea-officers—the second was his voyage to Tangier at the very end of the reign now opening. It is his relation to this body of men that I propose to discuss. It was a subject that, in the whole course of his life, probably claimed as much of his time and attention as any other. It was certainly one to which his contribution was of the first importance.

Sea-officers, Pepys and his contemporaries said. Naval officers, we say. Why the difference? Pepys was distinguishing between people like himself who were officers of the navy—as we would put it officials of the navy board—and people like Sir John Narbrough or Captain Wyborne—to name two of his particular friends—who occupied their business in great waters. Some of Pepys's colleagues, Penn and Batten most notably, had great experience in both spheres. Even Pepys himself could technically claim to have been a sea-officer. On the 13th of March 1669 we read in the diary:

But that which put me in good humour both at noon and night, is the fancy that I am this day made a captain of one of the King's ships, Mr. Wren having this day sent me the Duke of York's commission to be Captain of "The Jerzy" in order to my being of a Court-Marshall for examining the loss of "The Defyance" and other things; which do give me occasion of much mirth, and may be of some use to me, at least I shall get a little money by it for the time I have it; it being designed that I must really be a Captain to be able to sit in this Court.

A few days later he was not so much amused. Packing a Court-Martial with bogus Captains was a dangerous precedent. It was exactly the way to promote the favouritism and inefficiency that Pepys spent his whole life in fighting. So he privately compromised and determined that though playing his full part in the inquiry—"I did lay the law open to them and rattle the Master-Attendants out of their wits almost"—he would withdraw when the Court was reaching its conclusions.

The sea-officer proper, the naval officer of our day, cannot historically be considered merely in his professional capacity. He occupies a prominent position in English society, in our literature, in our manners and our morals. For the mid-twentieth century Noël Coward's *In Which We Serve* exemplifies the pattern: courteous, reliable, unself-seeking, balanced, competent, unemotional. We remember that King George V and King George VI were both brought up as naval officers and we observe that the present heir apparent is so serving. A century and a half ago at the high noon of the Royal Navy, Jane Austen portrays a large cast of naval officers to whose domestic virtues she pays memorable homage in the last sentence of her last novel.

The sea-officers of Pepys's day were, so to speak, the rude forefathers of these paragons. Unlike their successors in the twentieth century, or even in Nelson's day, they were contract labour, not permanent members of a profession with a recognised system of promotion and seniority. They were divided, socially and professionally, into two classes, the gentlemen and the tarpaulins. The tarpaulins, as their name suggests, were the real professional seamen who would earn their living in merchant ships when there was no billet for them in the King's. The gentlemen were scions of noble or landed families who recognised military leadership as one of the obligations of their position. One personified competence, the other the mental and social qualities of a class that had been bred to command and was likely to have had the advantage of a liberal education. It was Pepys's aim to fuse the two, an aim which by the time of Nelson and Jane Austen had, to a great extent, been achieved.

The means he employed were as various and resourceful as himself. Perhaps nowhere in his official life can we find a fuller expression of his personality. He based himself on the traditional wisdom of the apprenticeship system. The young gentleman must first and foremost serve at sea and obtain certificates from his commanding officers as to his 'sobriety, diligence, obedience to order and application to the study and practice of the art of navigation'. But literacy and cultivation of mind—those quintessentially Pepysian qualities—were given their proper importance. The young officer was required to keep a journal—not, one hastens to add, on the model of that unique and secret document on which his own fame rests. And finally, in December 1677, the Board of Admiralty agreed to the establishment of an examination, based on these requirements, for the rank of Lieutenant. This hall-mark of the modern profession was originated, designed and carried through entirely by Pepys. It is worth remembering that Examinations for admission to the Civil Service were not established for another two hundred years.

But institutional reform is only part of the story. One does not have to read far in Pepys to recognise his passionate interest in people and his skill in handling them. The stream of letters to individual officers that poured out of the Admiralty office during his two tenures of the Secretaryship taught the sea-officers what was required of them and set standards that have never since been entirely forgotten.

To take but one example. In the spring of 1675 the Captain of the *Phoenix* died while she was on the West Indies station and the Governor of the Barbados, Sir Jonathan Atkins, a personal friend of Pepys, appears to have secured the command for his son, instead of allowing the Lieutenant to succeed to the Captain's place . . . 'Justice . . .' wrote Pepys in a letter to the *soi-disant* Captain Atkins . . . must be preserved in all matters of that kind or the whole discipline of the navy must be abandoned, in which nothing is less to be controverted than the right of a lieutenant to succeed to the command of the ship upon the death of his captain, at least until he shall come within the reach of His Majesty or the Lord High Admiral.

'As to my own particular, besides the impartiality which I pretend to govern myself by in all other cases, there will be little ground to suspect me of any other dealings in this, the lieutenant being one I never saw, much less have any personal concernment for . . . whilst on the other hand I have that especial regard to my noble friend, your father, Sir Jonathan Atkins, as would easily incline me to the giving preference to a son of his on any fair occasion. But right is right and shall never on any consideration receive interruption where I can prevent it, and least of all where the prejudice attending his Majesty from it may be of importance a thousandfold more than the benefit of the private person that is to be gratified by it'.

This is the note that the sea-officers came to recognize in their tireless correspondent. Clarity, firmness, discipline, order: the whole backed up by the timeless certainties of morality—'Right is Right'—so characteristically reinforced by an explanation of the practical disadvantages one incurs by flouting them. And underlying it all is the idea of the service as a continuous entity, to whose future as well as whose present one's actions must refer. How incalculable have been the benefits of instilling that spirit.

Pepys, like his friend and mentor in these matters, Sir William Coventry, was generally accused of favouring the tarpaulins at the expense of the gentlemen. This was politically both dangerous and unpopular, since in the early years of the reign the tarpaulins were bound to be officers who had held commissions under the Commonwealth and Protectorate, whereas the Gentlemen were almost certain to belong to Royalist families. It is true that almost all Pepys's closest friends among the sea officers were tarpaulins. Sir John Narbrough, the great admiral who was also a great navigator, and Sir John Berry, who had entered the service as a Boatswain, both came into the Royal Navy from the merchant service, without so far as is known having served under the Commonwealth. But it was their professionalism and their conspicuous attention to duty that won them Pepys's high regard, not their political or social origins. And he had no prejudice against aristocrats, provided they were ready to learn their job. On the contrary he wanted more aristocrats in the navy, not less, because he rightly saw that parliament was an essentially aristocratic and landed club—witness the amount of time it spent adding to the already excessive number of game laws—and naval affairs would never get a proper hearing there until aristocrats could be brought to contemplate a naval career. But it must be a career, and they must accept discipline. As Drake had put it 'I would have the gentleman to haul and draw with the mariner, and the mariner with the gentleman'. Young sparks who came on board for a battle as though they were going for a fortnight's grouse shooting were worse than useless.

In all this Pepys was running counter to the spirit of the society in which he lived. To obey orders was still felt to be the part of a servant, a mechanic, an artisan or a tradesman. The Pride and Honour of a gentleman were, by our standards, morbidly egocentric. In the Civil War the Royalist commanders were for ever taking the huff with each other and sometimes with difficulty restrained from fighting duels when they should have been concentrating on the enemy. Professionalism in the army and the navy had grown fast under Cromwell but Charles II was a very different man to work for. Yet the sea-officers with whom Pepys, down at Deal, passed such an agreeable day while the King was riding into London close enough to St. Olave's for us to have heard the huzzas were products of the Cromwellian system. Perhaps their professionalism contributed to his own.