

The Royal Navy and Poor Relief, 1791-1834

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The Royal Navy in the Napoleonic Wars and Beyond

This research begins with the outbreak of hostilities with France in 1791 and follows the navy through the Second American War and the beginning of a long period of peace known as the Pax Britannia. During the wars, as Britain struggled to maintain a sufficient supply of seamen to man its overextended fleet, it called upon long-established methods of impressment, set recruitment quotas for local ports, and offered large bounties for seamen and landmen volunteers alike. In the end, this mobilization seems to have been successful, with Britain both succeeding in defeating both the French and American enemies and establishing naval superiority in the Atlantic. As the navy became a more permanent and professional military establishment, however, it began to realize that the emergency tactics which had been required to sufficiently man their fleets seriously may have undermined the efficiency of their forces. They seem to have consequently begun to move away from the policies of conscription and impressment which many critics of the navy viewed as being responsible for such disorderly acts such as the Great Mutiny of 1797.

Poor Relief Under Attack

At the same time, the economic hardships of the war era and new trends in social and economic thought brought intense criticism of traditional poor relief structures, which were officially centered around the local parish church. In the 1790s, Britain was struggling not only from the cost of waging a naval and land war against France, but it was also experiencing a period of intense drought that devastated agricultural yields and intensified unemployment and underemployment in agricultural areas. The added strain on the parish poor structures and the subsequent rise in poor rates prompted many to be critical of the established system and call for reform or even abolition. These criticisms were given further credibility with the rising popularity of Malthusian thought, which removed the sense of inherent moral responsibility from the debate and prompted many to believe that the poor laws were simply enhancing poverty by encouraging idleness. Instead, the solution for many philanthropists and policymakers was to encourage utilitarian means of relief beyond simply the traditional workhouse. For charities like the Marine Society, this role was fulfilled by the navy.



By the 1830s, the British Royal Navy had established itself as the most powerful force in the Atlantic and created a prestigious world image.

Thesis Abstract

This thesis will examine the interaction between these two controversial movements of the 18th and 19th centuries. It is generally accepted that the British Royal Navy recruited and impressed into its ranks a large number of seamen and landmen drawn from among the poorest classes of society. One aspect of the research will explore the extent to which the navy was specifically targeted by public policymakers and private philanthropists as a federally-funded source of jobs for the able-bodied poor. Another aspect will be the navy's response to these policies, and the extent to which they accepted and even targeted these often unqualified and unhealthy recruits.

In manning their large fleets, however, the navy garnered increasing criticism for targeting the lowest sectors of society.



Research

To explore this topic, I was given the Reynolds International Expedition Grant to travel to London for two weeks last July. The majority of my time I spent in the Public Records Office exploring primarily the records of the Admiralty, such as muster tables indicating the origins and backgrounds of the seamen on particular vessels, correspondence with the Impress Service, accounts of seamen quotas that all ports were required to fill, and other administrative records regarding the manning and mobilization of the Navy. The British Library provided tracts from the period discussing the navy's "manning problem" and the legality of impressment from a broad spectrum of sources within and outside the navy. The British Library also provided a selection of the records of the Marine Society, a charity devoted to raising and supplying poor landmen and boys for the navy. The collections of the National Maritime Museum were also very helpful in providing unpublished secondary sources and personal narratives from the period.

Preliminary Conclusions

Although my research is far from complete, several important trends have developed. At the level of national debate, much of the conflict over poor relief seems to have revolved around the need to remove the poor from public assistance and provide them instead with some form of independent employment, but the extent to which the navy was specifically targeted awaits further research. To utilitarian private philanthropists, however, the Navy must have been viewed as a legitimate source of this employment, as evident in the continued success of the Marine Society during this period and the regularity of its contributions. At the local level, many magistrates and parish overseers continued to see the navy as a convenient way to dispose of burdensome vagrants during the height of the Napoleonic Wars, using the poorest members of their communities to fill naval quotas and giving disreputable men the choice of imprisonment or enlistment. The actual impact on the composition of the navy is a subject of continued research, but given the number of landmen listed among seamen in many of the muster tables, this effect could have been quite large. As a result, although the navy was often portrayed as being indiscriminate in its choice of men, this period seems to reveal a distinct effort to disassociate itself from such stereotypes. As a result, disdain within the navy for the "quota men" sent by the local officials and the inept volunteers of the Marine Society seems to have been quite intense.