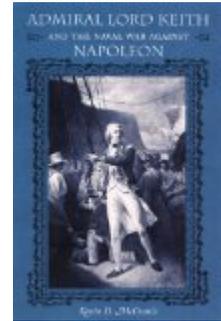


Kevin D. McCranie. *Admiral Lord Keith and the Naval War against Napoleon*. Bradford and Gene A. Smith, Series Editors. *New Perspectives on Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. xv + 256 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2939-9.

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## Beyond Nelson: The Life of a Forgotten British Admiral

The bicentennial of Lord Nelson's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar in 2005 generated a massive printing drive. Dozens of biographies hit the shelves and historians continue to be swamped by the multitude of studies on the Royal Navy's crowning achievement in the Age of Sail. This is nothing new: Nelson has always dominated the biographical landscape. Daring and aggressive, he first rose to prominence during the Battle of Cape St. Vincent in 1797, and then emerged as "Britannia's God of War" with his victories at the Battle of the Nile in 1798, Copenhagen in 1801, and Trafalgar in 1805.[1] He died a war hero; the people's war hero. Even today Britons flock to his tomb in St. Paul's Cathedral, Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, and walk the decks of HMS *Victory* in Portsmouth. In some respects our fascination with Nelson has led to the neglect of the larger history of the Royal Navy. Nowhere is this more evident than with Nelson's contemporaries. As Kevin D. McCranie explains in his biography of Lord Keith, all British admirals wanted to distinguish themselves in battle, but with only six major fleet engagements in the Napoleonic era, there were simply not many opportunities. Keith fell into this category. Despite holding four independent commands, including the prestigious Channel and Mediterranean squadrons, Keith never fought a major sea battle. As a result, historians and biographers have not paid much attention to this important figure. For this reason alone McCranie deserves praise: a study of Lord Keith is a most welcome contribution to the historiography. However, this is also a very good book, one that utilizes

Keith's career as a lens through which to view the larger history of the Royal Navy during the Age of Revolution.

George Keith Elphinstone was born in 1746. He entered the Royal Navy as a midshipman at the age of sixteen, and found an early patron in Vice-Admiral Francis Holburne, the port admiral at Plymouth. Elphinstone's first ship was HMS *Gosport*, commanded by John Jervis, a rising star in the navy and later the Earl of St. Vincent. Employment was scarce after the Seven Years War and Elphinstone took positions in both the navy and the East India Company. He passed for lieutenant in 1769 and became the second lieutenant of HMS *Trident*, the flagship of Admiral Sir Peter Parker in the Mediterranean, from which he was rapidly promoted to master and commander. With the American Revolutionary War heating up, Elphinstone found himself carrying Parker's despatches back to England at the right time. He was made post-captain and sailed for North America. For the next few years Elphinstone escorted merchant convoys and hunted down American shipping, in the process taking dozens of prizes and laying the foundation of his naval fortune. In 1780 Vice-Admiral Mariot Arbuthnot put him in charge of naval forces in the siege of Charlestown, largely because of his knowledge of southern waters ((he had previously helped protect the British colony of East Florida and had battered a heavy French privateer in those waters). Elphinstone guided warships and transports, led a flotilla of boats along the coast, and cooperated with General Henry Clinton in forcing

Charlestown to surrender. He was recognized as the naval leader in this attack and received high praise from Clinton. Elphinstone returned to England and took command of the fourth-rate HMS *Warwick*. After defeating the 50-gun Dutch warship *Rotterdam* and towing her into Spithead, Elphinstone was again sent to North America, but heading down the American coast he learned of General Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown in 1781. Most of the North American squadron was redeployed to the West Indies. Elphinstone stayed on to help with the evacuations of Savannah, Charlestown, and St. Augustine before returning to England. McCranie argues convincingly that Elphinstone carved out an important niche for himself in the Royal Navy in this period. In his mid-thirties, a senior post-captain with twenty years of continuous service, Elphinstone won several naval engagements during the American war and built a reputation as a fighting captain. He demonstrated skill and dedication as an officer, and had gained valuable experience in the amphibious siege of Charlestown with the British army.

McCranie does a good job of describing the network of patronage and personal contacts that propelled Elphinstone's career. He won a seat in the House of Commons in the American war and developed important political connections during the peacetime of the 1780s, even in the Royal Family. Prince William, later Duke of Clarence, was a midshipman in one of his earlier commands, and through him Elphinstone met George, Prince of Wales, heir to the British Crown. Perhaps because his brother-in-law was an opposition MP, Elphinstone made the mistake of pushing for the Prince of Wales's appointment as Prince Regent during the Crisis of 1788-89, falling out of favor with King George III in the process, when the monarch recovered from his bout of insanity. Clarence defended his friend, and despite previous opposition leanings, Elphinstone was given a command under Vice-Admiral Samuel Hood in the Mediterranean when the French Revolutionary War broke out in 1793. Toulon had rebelled against the French National Assembly and asked the Royal Navy to protect it from the radical army in Paris. McCranie describes Elphinstone's role in this episode. He excelled in defending the city and in carrying out joint raids with the British army on neighboring towns. He also supervised the evacuation of Toulon, receiving high praise from Hood, his fellow captains, and the British General. Elphinstone was rewarded with a commodore's pendant and carried Hood's despatches home to England, along with three French warships taken at Toulon. The following year he was promoted to admiral and made a Knight of the Bath. Await-

ing a vacancy in the Channel Fleet, Elphinstone did not participate in Admiral Richard Howe's famous victory on the Glorious First of June, the first major naval battle of the Great Wars. McCranie argues that Elphinstone was sometimes unlucky in missing fleet actions, and this was one of those times. However, he also emphasizes that Elphinstone had now matured as a politician, and when the Opposition Crisis erupted in 1794, the new admiral sided with William Pitt and the anti-French Revolution majority. He gained a valuable ally in the new First Lord of the Admiralty, and as McCranie explains, shed his opposition past to advance his naval career. Elphinstone understood the politics of patronage and excelled in this department throughout the Napoleonic Wars.

In 1794 he took charge of his own squadron in the Channel Fleet, charged with protecting East and West Indian convoys. The following year Elphinstone received his first independent command. France had invaded Holland, William of Orange fled to England, and the Admiralty worried that the French would take the Dutch Cape Colony and use it to attack British interests in the East Indies. Elphinstone commanded a significant squadron of British warships. The Dutch did not trust British intelligence, and he was forced to seize the colony with the British army. McCranie states that Elphinstone now had considerable experience in these types of ventures. Elphinstone next took his squadron into the Indian Ocean and attacked Dutch commerce, before racing back to the Cape when he learned that a Dutch squadron had been dispatched to retake the province. Elphinstone found the Dutch in Saldanha Bay, and sandwiched the enemy between his naval forces in the harbor and the army regiments on land. The Dutch surrendered without firing a shot and Elphinstone brought the combined squadron back to Britain. McCranie explains that he was riding high from his successes at the Cape and in the East Indies. Elphinstone used this new fame to advance his career. He enjoyed the support of Pitt and the King, and they awarded Elphinstone with an Irish baronetcy in 1796. He was now known as Lord Keith. The new peer also had a powerful patron in Henry Dundas, the Secretary of War. Keith was a trusted and dependable naval officer, so it was no surprise that he took a lead role in suppressing the Great Naval Mutinies of 1797. Keith used this crisis to demonstrate his skills as a diplomat and administrator. McCranie concludes that the period from 1793 to 1797 solidified Keith's position in the Royal Navy.

Unfortunately, the next couple of years were filled with frustration and missed opportunities. Keith became disgruntled in the Brest blockade, entangled in misun-

understandings with Lord Hood, and fell out of favor with the Admiralty. He turned to his old captain John Jervis, now Earl of St. Vincent, for help, and received a subordinate flag command in the Mediterranean. Keith was in charge of the Cadiz blockade when he learned that a massive French fleet was headed south to rendezvous with the Cadiz squadron before entering the Mediterranean. Bad weather allowed the French to pass by Keith unnoticed, but the Spanish warships were still in Cadiz. St. Vincent ordered Keith to repair to Gibraltar, to unite the various British squadrons, and for the next couple of years there ensued a game of cat and mouse, as the Royal Navy unsuccessfully chased the Combined Fleet around the Mediterranean and back up the coast of western Europe until it slipped back into Brest. St. Vincent was sick at this time and hampered British naval strategy in the Mediterranean by trying to organize everything from Gibraltar. He eventually turned the command over to Keith, his subordinate's most important position to date. But there were too many admirals in the region with too many competing interests. St. Vincent wanted Minorca protected, Nelson refused to leave Sicily and Naples, and all the while Keith desperately sought to bring the Combined Fleet to action. Keith chased the enemy into Brest before anchoring in Torbay, where command of the joint Channel and Mediterranean squadrons fell to Lord Alexander Bridport. This ended Keith's pursuit of the Combined Fleet. Although personally disappointed, and despite St. Vincent's interference and Nelson's insubordination, McCranie shows that Keith proved himself a capable and cautious leader, and returned himself to favor with the Admiralty.

Keith returned to the Mediterranean command in 1800. He dealt primarily with problems in the western Mediterranean, particularly around Italy, Naples, Malta and the African coast. Nelson resented losing his temporary command to Keith. Bolstered by his fame from the Nile victory in 1798, Nelson was a poor subordinate and sought to exercise greater independence than his position warranted. As McCranie points out, his departure from the Mediterranean in 1800 "enhanced the effectiveness of the fleet and left Keith's authority unquestioned" (p. 83). But this was still a year of disappointment for Keith. He blockaded Genoa, and supported the Austrian siege of that city, only to see Napoleon's army crush the Austrians several weeks later. Then he was ordered to support General Sir Ralph Abercromby in the siege of Cadiz. Many historians consider this the nadir of Keith's career, and McCranie takes pains to evaluate the expedition with a balanced hand. This was a joint opera-

tion, with Keith playing something of an advisory role to the British army. The Mediterranean squadron sailed from Gibraltar with scores of transports. It was scheduled to meet up with Captain Alexander Cochrane's squadron blockading Cadiz. McCranie argues that confusion reigned supreme. There was a lack of communication at the highest levels, Keith was indecisive and negligent, and the mission failed because the leaders were too slow in getting the men and boats ashore. McCranie admits that Keith deserves much of the blame for the Cadiz debacle. He remained detached and noncommittal, and for whatever reason refused to assume a positive and decisive role in the siege. Perhaps this had to do with the admiral's subservient position to the British army, but it was also uncharacteristic in light of Keith's previous experience in joint expeditions. McCranie suggests that most historians have conveniently overlooked several extenuating circumstances in this siege, and failed to assess well-deserved blame to other characters in the story. While Keith did not emerge from Cadiz unscathed, he was not criticized by the Admiralty and it did not tarnish his career. He lost the support of Dundas, for the expedition was his idea and Abercromby the secretary's highly touted protégé, but Keith simply turned to Lord Spencer and the Admiralty for patronage in the future. He was not relieved of the Mediterranean command.

Keith and Abercromby were given a second chance in 1801. With French victories over Russia and Austria on the Continent, Britain turned its attention to Egypt. There were problems in this campaign as well, but from the start the two leaders cooperated in planning the siege. Warships escorted the transports to Egypt, manned the boats and successfully landed the soldiers ashore, and provided them with necessary supplies. Keith also had the Royal Navy patrol the coast in case a French squadron appeared on the scene. Abercromby died early in the expedition, and was replaced by Major General John Hely-Hutchinson. The joint operation took Cairo and Alexandria in succession, and then transported the French soldiers and their supplies out of Egypt. According to McCranie, the Egyptian campaign was the "defining moment" of Keith's Mediterranean command, "and perhaps of his naval career" (p. 123). Serious problems arose with his own naval captains, first over Keith's treatment of the sick in Egypt, then becoming more and more personal and trickling back to the Admiralty. However, Keith maintained his professionalism under trying circumstances, and proved that he was capable of handling the stress of a long and tedious expedition. He was in charge of some 200 ships off the Egyptian coast for seven

months. When the British ships finally weighed anchor to return home, they learned of peace preliminaries, and Keith struck his flag in 1802. Accolades poured in from home and abroad. The Ottomans gave him gifts worth £10,000, he was officially thanked by both houses of Parliament in Britain, and he was raised to the status of a peer of the United Kingdom. McCranie feels that the Egyptian campaign was impressive: it bolstered the security of the British Empire, reaffirmed the Royal Navy's independent status in joint operations, and yielded important strategic results in the war against France. At the same time, Keith demonstrated that he lacked charisma and personality, which often led to misunderstandings with his own captains and with British army officers. His abrasive character seemed to grate on others. Keith was a respected admiral, but he would never be popular with his peers.

This did not stop Keith from receiving the most important commands in the Royal Navy. As the Peace of Amiens (1802) broke down, St. Vincent, the new First Lord of the Admiralty, made Keith the port-admiral at Plymouth. He needed a trustworthy administrator to mobilize the British fleet. Keith was disappointed to learn that Nelson would supersede him in the Mediterranean command, but St. Vincent told him that he would receive the North Sea squadron instead. This was a huge and tremendously important command. Unlike the Channel Fleet, composed of ships of the line to blockade French and Spanish battleships in port, the North Sea squadron used frigates and other small warships to prevent Napoleon's invasion. With over 200 vessels under his command, and six subordinate flag officers, Keith was in charge of the largest squadron in the Royal Navy. Success came down to record-keeping and administration. Therefore, rather than serve afloat as a conventional admiral, Keith set up headquarters in Ramsgate, from which he delegated orders to a myriad of detached squadrons. Despite the comings and goings of several First Lords and British governments, Keith focused squarely on Napoleon's invasion army. The North Sea fleet also protected massive convoys, carried out raids on French and Dutch ports, and when Austria made peace with France, evacuated British troops from Germany and transported them home. The chances that Napoleon would invade after the summer of 1806 became remote, so when another British administration came to power it dissolved the North Sea command into five smaller squadrons. Keith had been against this move for years, and having growing tired and underappreciated in the Northern command, he welcomed orders to strike

his flag. McCranie argues that the North Sea squadron was extremely important between 1803 and 1806, particularly as a "morale builder" when most Britons feared that Napoleon's invasion was imminent (p. 147). This was a complex situation and Keith thrived in his administrative role. McCranie maintains that it was no coincidence that Keith, a proven, experienced, and steady naval officer, was given the North Sea command at this pivotal juncture.

Keith found himself out of favor with the new British government and collected half pay for nearly five years. When the Prince of Wales assumed full Royal powers in 1812, the Prince Regent helped his old friend secure command of the Channel Fleet, traditionally the most prestigious in the Royal Navy. For the next couple of years Keith operated from his residence in Plymouth, delegating authority to subordinate admirals rather than taking to sea himself. Again he was not a traditional fleet commander. The Channel Fleet was charged with blockading the enemy in Brest and Basque Roads, pursuing French warships if they escaped, hampering French and American commerce, protecting British convoys, and assisting the Duke of Wellington's military operations in Portugal and Spain. Conflict with the United States in 1812 complicated Keith's responsibilities, but the Admiralty failed to provide him with more warships. McCranie argues that Keith's dealings with Wellington were the low point of his Channel command. Wellington criticized the Admiralty, enraged that the Royal Navy failed to provide his operations in northern Spain with adequate protection and support. Much of the friction stemmed from poor communication and the highest levels of command. While the Admiralty deserves some blame, McCranie suggests that Keith was mostly at fault, for not leaving Plymouth and meeting with Wellington personally. This would have allowed the two leaders to coordinate policies close at hand. Keith likely remained in Plymouth because he was now frail and old. McCranie suggests that the Admiralty should have replaced Keith, but powerful patrons would have made this difficult. He remained in charge through the spring of 1814, overseeing the evacuation of Wellington's troops as the Allies negotiated the terms of peace. Now close to seventy years old, Keith was relieved to strike his flag and return home to Scotland. McCranie concludes that Keith's advancement to a viscount in the peerage "demonstrated the government's esteem for a lifetime of service that was rapidly nearing an end" (p. 165). However, the admiral's career was not over yet, for he was called back to the Channel Fleet when Napoleon escaped from Elba and re-

turned to France in 1815. After the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon contemplated fleeing to America, but eventually surrendered to HMS *Bellerophon* off the French coast. He was brought to Plymouth while the British government decided his fate. Keith communicated personally with Napoleon, functioning as the key intermediary between the Admiralty, the British cabinet, and the fallen emperor. Keith treated Napoleon with respect, breaking the bad news that he would not be allowed to stay in Britain. He was banished to St. Helena instead. The Admiralty trusted Keith in this capacity and was pleased with his conduct.[2] Striking his flag for good in 1815, the admiral retired to his estate in Scotland, and died in 1823, at the age of seventy-seven.

McCranie argues persuasively that few British admirals “could match the diversity and longevity of his service” (p. 180). Keith never won a major fleet engagement; he did not enjoy the fame of some of his contemporaries, such as Howe, St. Vincent, Duncan, and especially Nelson; and perhaps because of this he has been neglected by historians and biographers. The author should be congratulated for filling in this historiographical gap. This is an elegantly written study of one of the most important figures of the French and Napoleonic Wars. McCranie argues that Keith played “a major, if underappreciated, role in the implementation and the crafting of British naval strategy” (p. 181). Keith held four independent commands—Eastern Seas (1795-96), Mediterranean (1799-1802), North Sea (1803-07), and the Channel (1812-15)—including the largest and most prestigious in the Royal Navy. He was a talented administrator and trusted fully by the Admiralty. Keith was awarded numerous personal honors, including a place in both the Irish and British peerages. His wealth from prize money

was legendary. McCranie gives a conservative estimate of £250,000, which Keith wisely invested in property and estates in England and Scotland. McCranie skilfully dissects the patronage system in Georgian Britain, and illustrates how Keith mastered politics to further his naval career. He was a cautious and steady naval officer, perhaps lacking in aggressiveness and originality; but as McCranie tells us, Keith was also an arrogant and abrasive character, sometimes uncompromising and withdrawn, most notably in the communication lapses that developed in the Cadiz expedition in 1800 and the friction with Wellington between 1812 and 1814. This reviewer’s one criticism is that McCranie overanalyzes Keith’s successes and failures. Because the admiral has been unfairly neglected by historians, McCranie bends over backwards to assess blame and dissect the blemishes on Keith’s record. He does so with a fair hand, pulling no punches with regard to Keith’s failures, but in the process the narrative becomes a little too defensive and reflective. Nowhere is this more evident than in the conclusion, where McCranie asks if Keith’s life was “successful,” and proceeds to examine this question both professionally and personally (p. 181). Such questions are too subjective for a book of this nature. Leaving these quibbles aside, McCranie has produced a fine biography, bringing to life one of the Royal Navy’s dominant figures of the Napoleonic era.

#### Notes

[1]. Andrew Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia’s God of War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

[2]. David Cordingly, *Billy Ruffian: The Bellerophon and the Downfall of Napoleon; The Biography of a Ship of the Line, 1782-1836* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003).

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