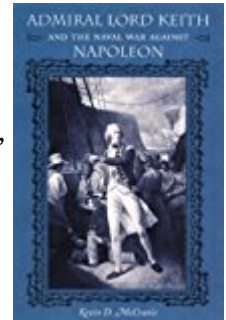


Kevin D. McCranie. *Admiral Lord Keith and the Naval War against Napoleon.*

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.



Reviewed by Oliver Walton

Published on H-War (June, 2008)

The historiography of Britain's Royal Navy features a huge number of biographies of a small number of stars, of whom Admiral Lord Nelson shines brightest by several orders of magnitude. Good studies of lesser figures are, however, in short supply, though they are central to building our understanding of naval society. Admiral George Keith Elphinstone, or Lord Keith, was, in fact, no minor figure, but a star in his own time, a man who, when commanding the Channel Squadron from his house outside Ramsgate, was seen to personify the navy's defense of Britain. As Kevin D. MacCranie writes in *Admiral Lord Keith and the Naval War against Napoleon*, "the people of England worried that his mere presence in London had left the coast exposed to invasion" (p. 129). Yet, Keith was not involved in any major fleet battle nor did he serve in the Admiralty, a record lacking the excitement or legacy to attract attention from biographers or historians. Keith has been subject only to three other biographies: one incomplete and unpublished by the hand of his secretary, James Meek; one from the 1880s by a family friend, based largely on Meek's work;

and one more recent and scholarly essay of twenty-two pages.[1]

Keith's career extended from the end of the Seven Years' War through the very end of the Napoleonic Wars; he served in all the major theaters in which the Royal Navy operated during those years. He spent more time commanding fleets than did his more glamorous contemporaries, such as Admiral Lord Saint Vincent and Nelson. In seeking to do Keith's career justice, MacCranie has conducted an exhaustive study of Keith's papers, which make up the largest personal collection of archival materials at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, with some one hundred thousand items.

The resulting book is a study not only of one of the Royal Navy's most important officers but also of the Royal Navy more generally; MacCranie's detailed account of Keith in command constitutes a useful contribution to the historiography of the Royal Navy's operations, especially during the wars against revolutionary and Napoleonic France. The author is also keen to explore how it was that the youngest surviving son

of the somewhat impoverished tenth Lord Elphinstone was from fairly inauspicious beginnings able to attain the highest rank in the Royal Navy, acquire considerable wealth, and become a viscount of the United Kingdom. Thus, MacCranie's story features command at sea alongside Keith's negotiation of Georgian politics and society in forging his naval career. McCranie's book gives very good accounts of the events around Keith, his actions as a captain, and the operations he directed as admiral. These are of particular value because they cover, in detail, campaigns that have often not been examined in depth in histories of British seapower. McCranie outlines effectively the problems and situations facing Keith and gives a fairly full account of the events as they unfolded. He is also good at tying in local developments with the broader strategic situation and with changes in domestic politics.

MacCranie organizes the book broadly and chronologically. The first chapter outlines Keith's early career during the latter stages of the Seven Years' War and his rise to post captain during the American War of Independence. The second chapter is more thematic, recounting how Keith developed a political career and built a network of interest, not least through his friendship with William, third son of King George III, which opened the door to a lasting relationship with the Prince of Wales. The chapter also details Keith's role in the operations of the Mediterranean Squadron in 1793-4 and ends with his promotion to rear admiral.

Subsequent chapters are more rigid in their chronological organization and examine Keith's various commands. Over the following two decades, he had an illustrious career. He commanded the naval squadrons at the Cape of Good Hope and East Indies (1795-96), a role that has remained in the shadow of the operations of his subordinate Rear Admiral Peter Rainier in the East Indies despite his capture of a Dutch fleet at Saldanha Bay. On his return to Britain, Keith

played an influential and underrated role in quelling the mutinies of 1797. He commanded the blockade of Cadiz as part of Saint Vincent's Mediterranean Fleet before taking overall command of the squadron from 1799 to the Peace of Amiens in 1802. Then, he was at the front line of the British defense against invasion when commanding the North Sea Fleet between 1803 and 1807. In 1812, he took on a new challenge. His command of the Channel Fleet from 1812 to 1815 entailed shipping protection against both French and American raiders, as well as supporting the Duke of Wellington's advance through Spain and France.

Some of the most compelling parts of the book concern Keith's relationships with patrons, politicians, and other naval officers. Keith had various connections with the Dundas family, which served him well, but he was also flexible enough to forge associations with other patrons. Perhaps the most significant was his relationship with the Prince of Wales, for whom he acted as a "trouble-shooter" in the years of peace in the late 1780s and early 1790s. Certainly, this connection assisted him in his high-flying career path. It is important to note, though, that Keith learned from his earlier forays into parliamentary politics and, in his more mature years, adopted a less partisan stance. He maintained links with figures across the political spectrum and was capable of working effectively with Henry Dundas, the First Viscount Melville, with whom there was little personal or political empathy. Keith's remarkable network of interest kept him in virtually continuous employment under different governments until 1807 when the "Ministry of All the Talents" fell. He was not, however, left on the shelf: he returned to command in 1812, after the Prince of Wales received full regency powers.

While most of the book tends toward the straightforward narrative style of history telling, McCranie also offers critiques of Keith's actions. These critiques can be incisive, and he often uses

them to introduce and conclude chapters and sub-sections. This analysis, thus, also helps to orientate the reader and will doubtless make the book more accessible to an undergraduate readership and other readers needing quick access. However, such sections seem a little stilted because they stand out from the narrative flow of the rest of the text.

Stylistic observations aside, the apparent separation of the evaluative from the narrative sections does have one major weakness. It allows McCranie to draw conclusions, within chapters but especially in the book's conclusion, for which he has not presented evidence, and which he has not signposted to the reader during the book's main narrative parts. The author, for instance, maintains that Keith lacked the killer instinct of a Nelson or Saint Vincent and tended to be cautious rather than aggressive. However, he recounts numerous examples of Keith being decisive and aggressive in tactical situations in his earlier career. Intriguingly, several of these involve his command of amphibious operations and naval brigades. This raises a question that McCranie does not address: was Keith a better military than a naval officer? There are also a number of naval encounters when Keith seems to have taken initiative. In contrast, McCranie explains the circumstances when, in May 1799, Keith's squadron, which was blockading Cadiz, came close to a major action with the escaped French fleet from Brest, but was unable to bring them to battle. While McCranie explains the reasons for Keith's decisions, he does not hint at what he might have done differently. Was the weather so much worse than when Admiral Lord Hawke had risked storm to defeat the French at Quiberon Bay? MacCranie does not offer an opinion. In essence, then, McCranie represents Keith's defense well, but is not convincing in his own critique of that justification.

McCranie suggests, in his conclusion, that "although Keith had a sense of honor, he was also ar-

rogant, abrasive, and often uncompromising" (p. 184). It is true that these traits might have surfaced when failing to land General Ralph Abercromby's military force at Cadiz in 1800 and in the sometimes strained relationship between Keith's Channel command and Wellington's army in Spain after 1812. But, McCranie's conclusion seems rather sweeping. He suggests that Keith "was dictatorial in his relations with the Dutch in the Cape Colony, and perhaps he was even worse at Genoa in 1800 when he dealt with the Austrians and the Genoese, ignoring their interests and objectives" (p. 184). Yet, in the book's relevant section, he presents Keith's cooperation in overwhelmingly positive terms throughout the siege of Genoa. He depicts Keith as having become frustrated with the slow Austrian advance, but he does not suggest anywhere in his account that this had an impact on the degree of cooperation. Rather, he portrays Keith's relationship with General Michael von Melas, the Austrian commander, as suffering only after Napoleon forced the Austrians to terms at the battle of Marengo, a turn of events that necessarily gave the two commanders rather differing priorities.

There are at least two areas that this book inadvertently raises as topics that are ripe for further exploration. MacCranie's focus on Keith's career understandably relies on an *upward* perspective in his analysis of the patronage system, but it would be fascinating to see an examination of how Keith operated as a patron. It is also disappointing that MacCranie glosses over Keith's years as a junior officer, and even as a captain, in such short time. Presumably, these were the years when he learned his trade and developed his skills as a commander, administrator, tactician, and strategist, and it would surely be a valuable undertaking to see his later record in light of this.

This book is by some margin the most substantial work on Keith, but 188 pages of text do not allow McCranie to do justice to all the various aspects of Keith's life and career that he wanted to

explore. For instance, the book makes some efforts to give a rounded picture of Keith, quoting some quite personal correspondence with his daughters and discussing, albeit briefly, the emotional impact of the death of his first wife and later remarriage. His forays into parliamentary politics feature, as does Keith's attention to his estates. However, this reader, at least, had the strange sense of having read a biography and learned a great deal about what Keith did, but not having "gotten to know" him or what made him "tick." Contrary to the plaudits on the rear dust jacket, it is neither a "classic biography," nor is it "likely to be the last word on the subject."

However, it is fair to say that the author's prime interests are in portraying Keith in command and looking at naval operations from Keith's perspective. In this context, MacCranie offers accounts of Keith's several amphibious actions as contributions to the present debate on multiservice operations. He is also keen to show how Keith negotiated the patronage system in the navy. These are accomplished with some competence. However, the separation between narrative and analysis leaves room for alternative conclusions to be drawn by readers, while important aspects of Keith's life could be examined further. We should, though, be grateful to MacCranie for bringing this most neglected naval star into the light of modern scholarship. That MacCranie's biography of Keith is a useful contribution to our understanding of the Royal Navy of the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is beyond doubt.

Note

[1]. James Meek, "Draft on the Life of Keith," unpublished draft in the Keith Papers, (call number KEI/47/1-3, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, United Kingdom); Alexander Alardyce, *Memoir of the Honourable George Keith Elphinstone, K. B., Viscount Keith, Admiral of the Red* (Edinburgh and London; W. Blackwood, 1882); and B. Lavery, "George Keith Elphinstone,

Lord Keith, 1746-1823," in *Precursors of Nelson: British Admirals of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter Le Fevre and Richard Harding (London: Chatham, 2000), pp 300-400.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Oliver Walton. Review of McCranie, Kevin D. *Admiral Lord Keith and the Naval War against Napoleon*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14557>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.