

# Circulation and Taste: The Return of the Royal Navy at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century

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*By the end of the eighteenth century, Britain had come to occupy the strongest position in the global economy. This was done via military conquest and economic trade, both of which created a Royal Navy made rich. This Britain was also a world in socioeconomic flux. There was a mobility that saw middle-class seamen turned rich men of 'taste'. This moment is symbolised perfectly by two very different, but equally enlightening artefacts, namely, the penultimate chapter of Jane Austen's final novel, Persuasion, and a portrait of Admiral Sir George Keith Elphinstone at the Cape of Good Hope. Both artefacts deal with the complexities of Britain asserting her dominance over a world at war, however still coming to terms with its own local anxieties. This dominance, which originated in hostilities towards the French, became an economic expansion which, in turn, became a globalised world of cultural circulation. The portrait of various Captains painted by Austen and the world-wide movement of artistic commodities via such captains, is rendered real in the portrait Elphinstone commissions. This circulation, of goods, people and above all, ideas, made this moment in Britain truly unique. The memorialisation of such a moment, by both writer and painter, becomes therefore that much more significant.*

The turn of the eighteenth century was an incredibly fluctuating and mobile period within British society. The power that Britain had under its control was one which came from a whole host of factors which are far too many for a short essay of this sort. Instead, this essay will approach Britain's imperialism through its naval wars, underscored by authors such as Linda Colley, who in *Britons: Forging a Nation 1707-1837*, states quite clearly that, 'Great Britain was an invention forged above all by war'.<sup>1</sup> The constant wars that Britain fought during this period, most significantly the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars against the French, all culminated in massive imperial and economic gains for Britain. These gains also directly diminished any other European imperial

competitors. Most importantly for this argument is the role that the Royal Navy played in this expansion. As Michael Duffy, in the *Oxford History of the British Empire (OHBE)*, suggests, 'Above all, the wars between 1793 and 1815 constituted a great Imperial and naval Armageddon... [which] led to a situation in 1815 in which British naval strength had increased since 1790 by 32.8 per cent'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it becomes evident that military expansion soon spread into economic expansion and, ultimately, cultural expansion.

Describing the domestic scene of this now globalised Britain, Stanley Chapman concludes, 'It has often been remarked the most singular feature of eighteenth-century English society

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Duffy, 'World-wide War and British Expansion, 1793-1815' in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume II: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Peter J. Marshall, Alaine Low, William Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 184-207 (p. 204).

was its fluidity. There were no barriers to upward (or downward) social mobility'.<sup>3</sup> However, this was not a seamless movement. While such, 'sailors,' were, suggests Peter Marshall, 'supposed to be the flower of English freedom', the anxieties the upper classes felt towards such social climbers were all too real.<sup>4</sup> The first opinion of Sir Walter Elliot, Austen's heroine's father, a Baron and landed gentlemen, describes this anxiety poignantly. Speaking on the navy, he says that, 'the profession has its utility, but I should be sorry to see any friend of mine belonging to it,' his first objection to it being that it brings, 'persons of obscure birth into undue distinction... raising men into honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of'.<sup>5</sup>

This was a moment in England when the very ideas of 'culture' and 'art' were also changing. John Brewer describes this cultural moment by suggesting England was, 'conscious of its rising status and [became] eager to clothe its naked wealth in the elegant and respectable garments of good taste'.<sup>6</sup> So, it would seem only fitting that a newly rich navy, come home to enjoy the spoils of War, would be of the foremost people excited by these ideals. To prove their worth, not only economically, but socially and 'culturally' became a characteristic of their class. And in such a way, this newly created Britishness was, according to Colley, 'imagined, communicated, debated, and memorialised in stone and on canvas, in maps, sketch-books, and

embroidery, as well as through the spoken, written and printed word'.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the commissioning, circulation and consolidation of art – in all its forms – becomes one of the foremost ways the naval persons of this generation secure their spot in this rising, 'tasteful' society. To this end, the portrait of a naval Admiral and the novel *Persuasion* by Jane Austen, while seemingly far removed from each other, both show the very real impact of such a cultural sea-change.

Admiral Sir George Keith Elphinstone was the fourth son of an upper-class Scottish family. He joined the navy, following his third brother in 1770 and from there entered the (British) history books as one of the truly great naval characters of his generation. He took territories in America, upheld sieges in the Mediterranean, doused mutinies in India and even mentored arguably the most famous British naval man of all, Nelson.<sup>8</sup> To follow his career in the navy is to see a clear vision of Wars fought, Empire's conquered and spoils savoured during this tumultuous period of British history. However, there is a specific moment in his career which shines a light on some of the subtler undertones of his person and, more importantly, his occupation.

1795 was the height of the Revolutionary Wars. The Dutch, having formally submitted to the French, presented a significant problem for the English looking to maintain their trade routes to

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Chapman, 'The Eighteenth-Century Structure of Merchant Enterprise' in *Merchant Enterprise in Britain: From the Industrial Revolution to World War 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 21-50 (p. 28).

<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Marshall, 'Introduction' in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume II: The Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Peter J. Marshall, Alaine Low, William Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 1-27 (p. 5).

<sup>5</sup> Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. by Elaine Jordan, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2007), pp. 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Colley, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> C. H. H Owen, 'Elphinstone, George Keith, Viscount Keith (1746–1823), Naval Officer and Politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 11 (2022), <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8742>> [17 March 2023].

the East. With their trade being a large proportion of the revenue, the English required to fund the war, the indirect consequences of the Dutch interference could be huge. The reaction from the newly elected Dundas – England’s secretary of state for war – was swift and deadly.<sup>9</sup> Three thousand men were sent to take the Cape of Good Hope from the Dutch which was secured by September of that year.<sup>10</sup> Admiral Elphinstone, Captaining the HMS *Monarch*, takes control of the Cape within six weeks of the first attack on Muizenberg. It is certainly not the most famous of the battles in this war, and Owen suggests that in fact, ‘Elphinstone had little part in the final action’, but it is a significant victory nonetheless.<sup>11</sup> Following this, Elphinstone moves on to India for almost a year. Then, in 1796, he hears of an attempt from the Dutch to take back the Cape. He returns, finds the small Dutch fleet in Saldanha bay – some 100km north of the Cape – and moves in with such a force that, ‘the Dutch were persuaded to surrender without a shot being fired’.<sup>12</sup> Four years later in 1799, following his return from an extended period of action in the Mediterranean, Elphinstone sits for a Royal Academy artist, William Owen, to commemorate his time in the Cape. The question that remains for us to ask is, why? It was not his grandest battle, his most noteworthy, or even – despite its fairly large spoils – his most profitable. Therefore, it begs the question, why would he want to celebrate these short, rather arbitrary skirmishes at the other end of the world?

*Persuasion* is, not dissimilar to the time at the Cape for Elphinstone, by no means the most

memorable of Jane Austen’s novels. It is a short, closed, little romance set in Austen’s favoured places of South-West England. However, the subtle undertones that Austen persistently alludes to and includes illuminate the kind of dynamics at play in the England of the time. The novel was written in 1815 and 1816, in the wake of Waterloo – and the very year Elphinstone formally retires from the navy – and ultimately was published posthumously in 1817. The importance of naval characters and the anxieties of the upper classes feature prominently. I will focus on one single chapter – Chapter 11 – in order to excavate closely the proponents of our argument.

A brief synopsis of the themes in the novel would do well to lead us into the Chapter. The novel shows two wealthy, landed, families – the Musgroves and the Elliots – as they try to come to terms with the marriage of their respective daughters. Both families are soon overwhelmed by contact with numerous naval officers and their families – the Crofts, Harvilles, Benwick and Wentworth – and the instances and occurrences that bring these two separate classes of people together provide the plot line. Austen, through her heroine Anne Elliot, constantly undermines the vanity of Sir Walter Elliot, his eldest daughter Elizabeth, and the novel’s unseemly antagonist, Mr Elliot – the cousin set to inherit the Elliot fortunes and titles. She shows outward contempt for their self-obsession with names, estates and successions. In direct contrast, the worth, honour and value of the naval persons seems to excite and entice both Anne and Austen alike. Sir Walter, his own estate being rented by a newly rich Admiral,

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Fry, ‘Dundas, Henry, first Viscount Melville (1742–1811), Politician’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 8 (2021), <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8250>> [17 March 2023].

<sup>10</sup> Duffy, *OHBE*, p. 189.

<sup>11</sup> Owen, *ODNB*, (para. 9 of 26).

<sup>12</sup> Owen, *ODNB*, (para. 10 of 26).

does not know how to deal with them. He is sometimes scared, sometimes charmed and often condescending towards them, however the worth of these men, becomes more and more evident throughout the novel.

The Chapter in question is the climax of the whole novel. Anne, after constant self-deception, learns the true feelings of her longed-for Captain Wentworth, and all finishes well. The first paragraph sees Anne wanting to speak to her console, Lady Russell, in exposing the deception of Mr. Elliot, however she is diverted and suggests that, 'Mr. Elliot's character, like the Sultanness Scheherazade's head, must live another day...'.<sup>13</sup> This is a reference to the famous story book, *Arabian Nights*. In this subtle reference, Austen links quite seamlessly her story to that of a global scale, transporting the Arab and East Indian world into the locality of Bath. However, there are subtle power dynamics at play. By referencing this world, Austen also asserts a British dominance over it. *Arabian Nights* is simply the English translation of the collection of ancient stories, it can become a derogatory way to include the story while simultaneously Othering the nation from where it has come.<sup>14</sup> Directly following this, Anne engages in a fascinating conversation with Captain Harville which proves to be the preface of the novel's exposition. It reads,

*'Look here,' said he, unfolding a parcel in his hand, and displaying a small miniature painting, 'do you know who that is?'*

*'Certainly, Captain Benwick.'*

*'Yes, and you may guess who it is for. But' (in a deep tone) 'it was not done for her. Miss Elliot, do you remember our walking together at Lyme, and grieving for him? A little thought then – but no matter. This was drawn at the Cape. He met with a clever young German artist at the Cape, and in compliance with a promise to my poor sister, sat to him and was bringing it home for her. And I have now the charge of getting it properly set for another!... He undertakes it;' (looking towards Captain Wentworth) 'he is writing about it now'.<sup>15</sup>*

The painting of Admiral Elphinstone (Figure 1) shows him on the deck of the *Monarch*, in a vice-admiral's undress uniform and donning the star and ribband of a Knight of the Bath – which he had been given in 1794, the previous year, for his efforts in Toulon. In the background of the painting is the iconic figure of Table Mountain – symbol of the Cape. The painting of Elphinstone is believed to have been commissioned sometime between August and November 1799 as this was the only period he was in England the whole year.<sup>16</sup> He also commissioned at least two more paintings in this short, three-month stay at home. One, a portrait by John Hoppner, a German physician's son, is currently part of the Royal Collection, and another by a fled French monarchist, Henri-

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<sup>13</sup> Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. by Elaine Jordan, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2007), p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> Kuldip Kaur Kuwahara, 'The Power of Storytelling and Deferral: Anne Elliot, Jane Austen, and Scheherazade', *Jane Austen Society of North America*, 28.2 (2008) < <https://jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol28no2/kuwahara.htm?> [accessed 20 March 2023].

<sup>15</sup> Austen, p. 182.

<sup>16</sup> Owen, *ODNB*, (para. 14 of 26).



Figure 1: William Owen, *Portrait of Admiral Lord George Keith Elphinstone, on the deck of the 'Monarch'*, circa 1799, oil painting, 762 mm x 630 mm, Greenwich Hospital Collection, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

Pierre Danloux.<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup> The Danloux painting depicts Elphinstone at the Battle of Muizenberg, similar to Owens. The point of interest for us in answering our prior question is that directly before this cultural sabbatical, in 1798 and early 1799, Elphinstone had suffered arguably the greatest failure of his entire career. He had been chasing French and Spanish ships all over the Mediterranean for almost a year without ever catching them or engaging them, and was heavily criticised for it.<sup>19</sup> It is this moment which seems to highlight both the achievements and anxieties of naval Officers at the turn of the century. Elphinstone, now a very wealthy and well-established man, returns to England embarrassed. He then commissions multiple portraits of one of his, albeit not remarkable, but most successful conquests. His confidence is shaken, however his new ability to use rank, power and wealth, to shape the narrative of his story and celebrate his achievements – now almost five years prior – shows the significance of this moment in England. He commissions portraits memorialising his achievements and at the same time asserting his cultural class. He is able to maximise the newly culturally globalised world which finds England at its centre. He commissions three portraits from people of three different nations – Germany, France and England – to commemorate a moment in which he was able to dominate two other lands – the Netherlands and South Africa. The commodities of these paintings, and a wealthy naval officers need to commission them, show clearly the fluid dynamics that were permeating the culture of England at the turn of the century.

It signifies once again the global dynamics that were at play during this period. Britain's hold on global power saw a culture being created that included such peripheries in it. The exoticisation excited the new-found classes of Brewer's 'high culture' and the circulation of such ideas was as prevalent on board the Royal Navy's ships as any other good or spoil.<sup>20</sup> A rich man, made from the spoils of a career aboard the Royal Navy's ships, returns home to assert himself as a man of culture and taste by commissioning a piece of art. The commodity of the painting and portrait perfectly emulates the circulation of goods and art at this time, one centred in the global politics of war, money and power – with Britain at its centre, and the navy at her heart. Hoppner, Danloux, Owen and Elphinstone collaborate to symbolise these fluctuations and to glorify the position that both naval hero and Britain finds itself at this time.

It is within this context that the inclusion of Benwick's portrait and Austen's assertion in the worth of the navy becomes illuminated. There is an incredibly complex dynamic at play in the short little dialogue. The inclusion of a miniature portrait, commissioned for a naval Captain whilst on duty in a far-off corner of the Empire in order to have it sent home to England, seems a bizarre circumstance to add immediately before the novel's climax – and provides an almost uncanny similarity to Elphinstone's. However, Austen is subtly insinuating once again the crucial social politics surrounding the navy in England at the time. With new-found wealth, status and power, the navy had only one other domain to secure in order to break into the inner sanctum of British

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<sup>17</sup> Royal Collection Trust, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/1/collection/400990/george-keith-elphinstone-later-viscount-keith-1746-1823> [accessed 20 March 2023].

<sup>18</sup> National Galleries Scotland, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/artists/henri-pierre-danloux> [accessed 24 February 2023].

<sup>19</sup> Owen, *ODNB*, (para. 13 of 26).

<sup>20</sup> Brewer, *Pleasures*, p. 7

elite – culture and taste. By asserting a cultured air, in the commission of a miniature portrait, Benwick takes on the role of all newly rich British Captains, almost identical to Elphinstone. This act secures in our minds, and Anne's, the worthiness of Captain Wentworth upon his confession. The circulation of such an artefact, commissioned in South Africa, to a German artist, for an Englishman who intends it for his wife, and now makes it over to another, once again asserts the global imperial, economic and ultimately cultural dominance of England. It sums up, with supreme Austenian tact, a global moment in all its complexity.

The chapter then finishes, plotline resolved, lovers engaged and story closed, with another imposition of Naval attitudes. Wentworth, pining on the lost intervening time between his first dismissed proposal and now, says that,

*Six years of separation and suffering might have been spared. It is a sort of pain, too, which is new to me. I have been used to gratification of believing in myself to earn every blessing that I enjoyed. I have valued myself on honourable toils and just rewards. Like other great men under reverses... I must endeavour to subdue my mind to my fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve.*<sup>21</sup>

It is another strange way to end a chapter. As opposed to the open happiness of a newly engaged and renewed couple, Austen comments on the need for reliance on the strength of 'honourable toil' and the fortune which the captain of a ship 'deserves'. It is telling therefore, that the final two words of the whole novel, instead of being an expected 'happily-ever-after' are rather the proud, noble words in regard for Britain's Royal Navy: 'National importance'.<sup>22</sup> What becomes very interesting to note is that

this Chapter was originally not included in the first edition of the novel. The first edition contains a climax in which Wentworth and Anne come across each other in private and the confession happens directly – without miniature portrait or letter included. Austen feels compelled, like Elphinstone, to reaffirm the worth of the Navy by including them in the cultural upper classes of a shifting England. The commission of a painting, both literally and literarily, become the hallmark of a navy instituting itself in the cultural psyche of an enormously expanding England.

The British Royal Navy came to occupy a space at the turn of the eighteenth century which epitomised a global moment. It symbolised the changing power dynamics of a growing England. An England gaining strength, militarily, economically, and most importantly, culturally. The chapter in a famous author's novel and the portrait of a famous naval Admiral both show the British world in a new state, a different state of being. They subtly create links within the psyche of a generation which is conflicted in accepting these new, proud and rich people as part of the Uppers – of both class and taste. Although created eighteen years apart, they both present the snapshot of a moment in time. They are the solidification and memorialisation of a world in flux. The commission and subsequent circulation of pieces of art, stories and memories materialise a moment. They materialise the new-found mobility of a new class of people. A seemingly honourable, noble, and now – most importantly – 'cultured' class of people.

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<sup>21</sup> Austen, p. 194.

<sup>22</sup> Austen, p. 199.

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