

A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815. By Christopher McKee. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991. xvi, 600 pp. \$49.95, ISBN 0-87021-283-4)

Christopher McKee, author of *Edward Preble* (1972), has now produced an exhaustively researched and wonderfully comprehensive examination of the first generation of American naval officers. This prosopography enters the woefully neglected field of the social history of the American military, still best represented by Peter Karsten's *The Naval Aristocracy* (1972), which covers the period 1845 to 1925.

McKee's database covers 2,902 appointed officers, from the navy's first six captains (1794) to those midshipmen commissioned the day before peace was announced in February 1815. For greater depth of coverage, he has focused his sharp eyes upon those 653 men entering service in 1800, 1804-1805, 1809, 1812, and 1815. Equal attention to each man weights the analysis heavily toward the lower ranks—midshipmen, sailing masters, and lieutenants—which made up 80 percent of his population. The results refreshingly take the text far from the rote praise of such famous men as James Lawrence and John Paul Jones (of whom McKee is delightfully deflating).

Noting the advantages of group biography in providing a grid upon which the history of individuals and events can be placed, McKee confesses that his approach could lack intimacy and "the depth of psychological understanding." The author compensates in two ways; the first is in his storytelling, which fleshes out a variety of characters previously lost to a history dominated by the heroic captains of 1812. He also provides fifty-four portraits of his officers—with sometimes quirky captions, such as his description of Thomas Turner who "even looked like an accountant of the navy!"

McKee has many a kind word for the early American navy. Apparently the administrative and financial bureaucracies were run honestly and efficiently by apolitical and regionally sensitive gentlemen. And despite the great number of "wild boys" who joined the corps, most officers served honorably, commanding through a shared sense of deference, enforced upon crews with the cat-o'-nine-tails and upon the officers with equally liberal use of education and indoctrination. McKee has quantified each of these leadership tools by counting the boatswain's lashes as well as the chaplain's lessons.

A career in the gentlemanly and honorable profession provided security for those who survived the vicissitudes of tropical storms and diseases, as well as big-navy/small-navy policies. Pursers, and on rare occasions captains, could even attain wealth, but for the most part the navy sustained the middle-class respectability with which most commissioned officers entered the service. In fact, the greatest threat

to naval officers was the well-charted alcohol abuse.

With this book's wealth of information and flawless prose, its shortcomings are few. This reviewer's greatest concern is the failure to make a strong connection between the stable, progressive officer corps and the alleged fighting effectiveness of this navy. McKee writes eloquently on the amount of teaching young officers received in their "on-going self improvement," but he neglects their training to fight: to sail efficiently, to achieve tactical superiority, and to command gun crews to beat an enemy. These are, after all, the criteria upon which fighting navies are based.

Nonetheless, this is an extremely valuable contribution not only to the study of naval history but also to that of the early American republic. It should also be read by social historians for its thorough research and as a guide for further study of this fascinating, influential, and well-documented group

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