



The  
*Richard Boulton*

Newsletter

Issue XVIII



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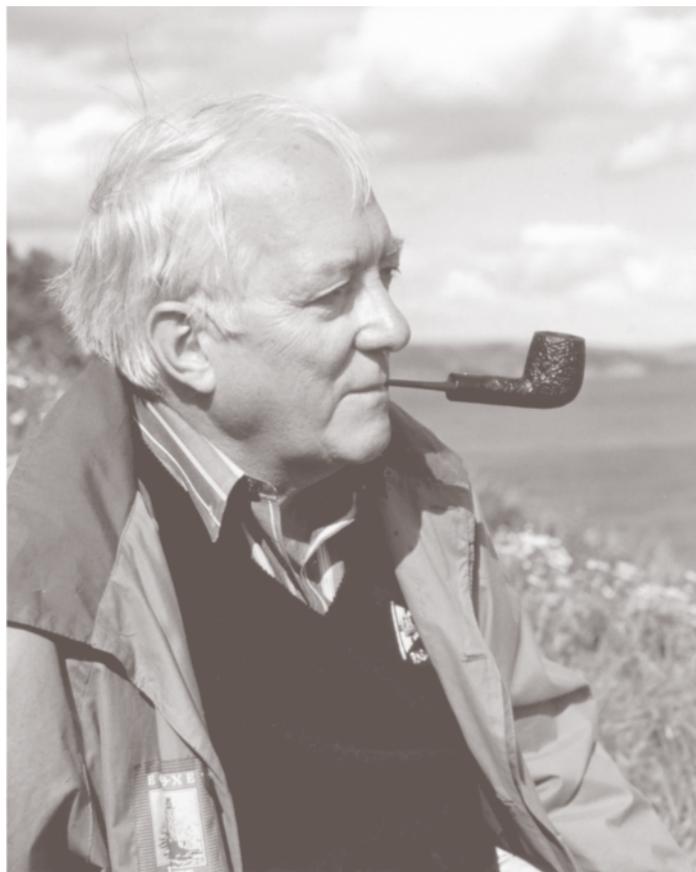
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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent  
Photo by Kimberley Reeman

## Part One

### *Time and Distance*

When I first grasped the opportunity to write about the life and times of Richard Bolitho, I was contemplating three or perhaps four books in the series. Curiously enough, it was my American publisher at the time who suggested that I should put into words what he had long known was close to my heart. I had always had the greatest interest in the sailing navy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a child, I can remember being taken around the HMS *Victory*, Nelson's last flagship, during Navy Week in Portsmouth, always a grand and exciting affair for a small boy. Perhaps it was born in me even earlier than that, although, as my family had produced a long line of soldiers, it is difficult to see how.

I tried to discover all I could about the men of those times, the ships and the battles which could fire the mind of even a soldier's son. It was not surprising that I should choose to enter the navy when war broke out. And that first love never left me, despite the sights, the suffering, and the destruction of some of those same ships which I had explored at Navy Week.

When Richard Bolitho walked into my life, and I believe the choice was as much his as mine, I learned the vital importance of research. Not just what the history books said, or what some detached 'expert' might describe, but something far, far deeper, like love, a need to belong, to

understand what these men were like. Whom they knew, what they saw and experienced, what held them together in times of terrible danger and hardship.

Writing about such characters, it is essential to ask yourself, 'What is happening now?' Not, 'what was happening *then*.' Otherwise, you can only present a modern man in costume.

It is not enough to know the size of a ship, how many in her company, the strength of her armament, the plan of her sails. All necessary, but, like the painter, you need more than a few facts and measurements to create a picture which a layman can appreciate and enjoy.

I had been a writer for ten years when the first Bolitho story was published in 1968, and the difference in the two styles of novel was evident from the beginning. In a sailing man-of-war, the main action takes place on deck, and therefore the central characters are visible at any one time. It is essential to learn where everybody stands, his function, his efficiency or otherwise, and to know who or what he can hear if an order is passed.

In Bolitho's navy, instruction was very much on the apprentice system; there were no training schools or depots ashore. Would-be officers usually entered the navy at the age of twelve, some younger, and their tuition began from that moment. It was usually undertaken by experienced master's mates and other warrant officers, with the sailing-master guiding a midshipman's first hesitant steps into the mysteries of navigation and weather lore. So, too, the lieutenants continued to learn from

experience, each with the hope of the impossible, a command of his own.

On the lower deck, it was much the same. Men who had been seized by press gangs and dragged aboard to face the harsh discipline of a king's ship had very likely never been at sea before. Sail and gun drill, endless repair work, sometimes aloft in a screaming gale – it either made the seaman or broke him.

So where do you discover the smaller, intimate details of daily life? Personal diaries are like gold, but they are few and far between. Imagine my surprise when a lady sent me a diary which had belonged to one of her ancestors in 1810. A lieutenant, he had listed with great care all his duties in various parts of the ship, the mast which was his responsibility, and the names and details of some of his seamen, the good and the bad. And then, when you turned the diary over and read it from the opposite end, our lieutenant had listed most of the card tricks, jokes, and bawdy naval ditties of the time, some of which would even be banned today!

The most reliable source of information is old letters. It sometimes took months for the busy courier-brigs and fleet schooners to run down on various squadrons, let alone find solitary ships, and it was common for younger sailors, especially midshipmen who might be separated from their parents for the first time, to continue with the same growing letter until the next courier vessel was sighted. Grumbles about food, complaints about treatment which was considered unfair, or too

much favouritism shown another, these letters make perfect introductions to the writers' lives. Who they were, their fears and concerns, and their ambitions: you are there with them.

Unfortunately for them and for us, there were not many sailors who could read and write. If a letter did arrive for such a man it was customary for another lucky enough to be able to read to do so aloud, both for the benefit of the man in question and for his messmates, who, perhaps, never had news from any one. It was the sort of bond which made the British sailor what he was, the strength of his own ship.

Despatches, like letters, depended very much on the time and distance required to deliver them. If ships had been away from fleet or squadron for any length of time it was always possible that events in that world beyond the horizon had far outreached them. A captain would often have to rely on his own discretion or experience on the sighting of an unknown vessel. It was not unknown for a captain to bring an enemy to battle, perhaps even destroy his own ship, only to discover that their two countries had been at peace and the death and destruction avoidable, if only the news had reached them earlier! Instead of glory, a court-martial would be the only outcome, unfair though that would seem today.

Fortunately from my point of view, there are some people who would never think of destroying those old records which are meat and drink to the historical writer. In St. James's Street, London, for instance, at Number Three, to which Richard

Bolitho was first taken by his beloved Catherine, the old shop is much as it was at that time, when sea-officers about to leave for the other ends of the earth would go to buy good coffee and the right wines, not only for all occasions, but wines which would travel well via Good Hope or Cape Horn. And those records still survive in the shop.

When I am there, I look at the door with its old-fashioned glass, the worn and sloping timbered floor, sometimes I sense a lull in the traffic, two shadows perhaps, the tall sea-officer with the lovely lady on his arm. Another parting? For me, it is always another reunion, and a reward.

## Part Two

### *The Conversation Continued*

*by Kim Reeman*

**D**ouglas, at the beginning there was a young captain, Bolitho, a young lieutenant, Herrick, and John Allday, in *To Glory We Steer*. A lot of water since then days, as Allday would say, and people are sometimes disappointed or even rather shocked at the way some of your characters have matured. Do you have any hand in this?

I have absolutely nothing to do with it. Characters who were originally intended to fill a certain role too often tend to take over themselves – even those to whom I’ve become personally attached. A case that comes to mind is Bolitho’s first coxswain, Stockdale. Writing as I was an extremely explosive

battle scene, the Battle of the Saintes, as the enemy’s flag comes down, Bolitho turns to his coxswain, but he has fallen. Bolitho always blames himself for not seeing Stockdale fall, as he was attempting to protect his captain, but I, the author, never even saw it happen. I was as shocked as he was. This is what I mean. As in real life, there are many such instances.

*People have expressing a lot of concern lately at Herrick’s behaviour.*

Yes, he’s driving me nuts, I can tell you that. But if we trace his career, back to the moment he first appears as a junior lieutenant aboard *Phalarope*, we can detect even then a stubbornness, an intractability, which has simply intensified over the years. His views of right and wrong are always black and white, always have been since he first appeared, and I hardly even knew the chap. It’s not for nothing that my Liberty rhinoceros is called Captain Herrick.

*Did you know what he was going to do in this book? First of all, did you know he was going to appear?*

No. I knew the Admiralty was going to send someone, but I didn’t know who. Of course, from their lordships’ point of view he was the obvious choice, a victim or a scapegoat if things went wrong. His decision was a great surprise to me – I wasn’t quite sure what he was going to do.

*Will we see any more of Herrick?*

Yes. I don't know how or where.

*Has Keen's career surprised you?*

No. I think it's largely due set him by Bolitho, whom he met when he was a midshipman. Despite all Keen's father's efforts to persuade him to leave the navy, he will stay in because of Bolitho.

*Do you think he ever got over his first affair, with the Tahitian girl?*

No. He never had another relationship with a woman until Zenoria.

*I think the interesting thing about Keen is his innocence, his virginity, in what we've been conditioned to believe was a universally dissolute age. You often said you thought life in a King's ship was monastic in certain respects – you still feel that's true?*

Yes. And the divisions among that society aboard a ship were very rigid. I think it is very possible for Keen to have remained what I first called him, a very nice young man. A brave one, too.

*Do you think his marriage was doomed from the start?*

Yes, because her love came from gratitude, for what he did for her, and gratitude is not enough.

*Adam, now.*

Yes. Adam. As Bolitho says, 'Oh, Adam, Adam what have you done?'

*You had no control over that, either.*

No. None. It was one of the most natural things I've ever written. A sense of grief, a sense of need, a sense of loneliness, and when he saw the mark on her back, that just did it – it all came together like an explosion.

*Is he scarred by that relationship as Keen is scarred, or is Keen more resilient?*

He is very deeply scarred. Keen is bred to it, Adam isn't. Everything Adam has, except for the love of his mother, the prostitute, he owes to Richard; his qualities, even his failings are like his uncle's in many ways.

*What do you perceive to be his failings?*

Adam? He's very hot-headed – Bolitho was once – but Bolitho has service and rank to control him, guide him. Adam can't see anything beyond being a frigate captain, and when the war ends, as end it must, what then? He has a quick temper, but that's not a failing.

*Do you think he sees himself becoming more like his father?*

I don't know. I think Richard would see him becoming more like Hugh, and I sense him doing that, but I don't know how he sees himself. It's only recently that he's been allowed to think favourably of his father – before that he regarded him as a traitor and that was it. Now, he's sat in the same chair in the house in Newburyport, and spoken with American officers who knew him – now he may be able to see his father's courage, although he would never forgive his disloyalty. That's why he's given everything he has, his love, his loyalty, to his uncle, and he's had a lot of handicaps being Bolitho's nephew.

*Do you know what's going to become of Adam?*

I thought I did, but I've had to do a complete rethink. I think Adam will go on in the navy.

*What will Allday do?*

He's starting to worry, for the first time since we've known him, being torn between leaving his wife and daughter and failing Bolitho by staying ashore. He has responsibilities, a woman who adores him, and one to whom he feels a deep attachment, possibly for the first time in his life.

*Has Allday changed, essentially, in his outlook on things?*

Yes, he's more conscious of his value as a friend than as a servant, and he's probably prouder of that than anything else. He feels free to offer advice to his admiral, and to come and go as he pleases.

*He is not at all a simple man.*

No. Of him, Bolitho thinks, imagine what he would be if he had had an education. He believes he's bad enough without it.

*Did you know he would be illiterate?*

No, I just thought he might be, as most sailors were. It's no shame, although he feels it now that he's in a position of authority. I didn't know Avery was going to read his letters, because Yovell and Ozzard always used to . . . but Yovell made it sound like a sermon and Ozzard would be clucking with disapproval throughout . . . Avery can't get used to the idea of sitting down with a common seaman, so it's an education for him. And of course the irony is that Avery, who can read, never gets any letters.

*Neither does Tyacke, until Cross of St George. Do you know what that letter contains?*

Yes, and I know what his reply was, although I sensed that he didn't really want me to know – and again, if I were proved wrong, I wouldn't be surprised. As for Tyacke, it goes back to Bolitho's qualities of leadership, and being able to inspire that . . . otherwise how could he have persuaded a

man so badly disfigured, and so damaged in spirit, to be his flag captain, watched by hundreds of men every day, and meeting other people in the outside world.

*Was he one of the most difficult characters you've ever written about, to get to know?*

No. My main difficulty was dealing with other people's reactions to him.

*Do you feel his pain?*

Yes, I do, very much so. I particularly feel it when people stare at him – especially junior midshipmen. They always look away or drop their eyes – I've seen it happen myself.

*Do you think he would be truly happy in Africa, or anywhere else?*

I don't quite know what the attraction is about Africa for him unless he went back out there for the anti-slavery patrols, which went on forever. He would have the sea and his little ship and that was all he wanted, and he was bloody good at it.

*If he lost his admiral, would he leave the navy?*

I don't know. The ship has paid off – he's lost his admiral now. I don't quite know what happens to Bolitho now. Their relationship has changed both of them completely; Tyacke will never be able to

go back to being a man hiding in shadows, and Bolitho knows that. He has some very fine qualities – he doesn't put up with any kind of pomposity, he cares very much for the welfare of his men, he's very courageous. But he will always remain a man apart, because except for his admiral, people will always say, what must he have been like beforehand? Bolitho never says that. He accepts him for what he is. These are the sort of people, not forgetting Inch or Farquhar or Neale, or Browne with an 'e', or Jenour, who have inspired and saddened and made Bolitho the sort of man he is.

## Part Three

### *A Ship Shall Be Judged*

By 1812, and with the renewal of war with the United States, the style and rating of ships had changed only slightly. The big ships of the line, the three-decked first-rates of one hundred guns or more, were still predominantly flagships. The second-rates, three-deckers of ninety or more guns, were in the minority. As before, the familiar and trusted 'seventy-four', the two-decker, made up most of the battle fleet, and was the backbone of every line of battle.

The smaller fourth-rate had been all but phased out, being too small to withstand the broadsides of heavier ships and too slow to operate with, or against, the fifth- and sixth-rates, frigates, 'the eyes of the fleet' and the ambition of every eager young

captain. There was disagreement as to how many guns defined a frigate's rating. Originally the ship was classified by the number of gunports she was pierced for, but the introduction, in 1779, of the short and deadly carronade, or Smasher as it was respectfully nicknamed, often upset the balance. An upper-deck gun which operated on a slide and without a port, the carronade was considered additional to armament, and did not, therefore, count toward a ship's rating, which in turn determined the pay and seniority of the individual captain.

The rules were further confused when, in 1781, a fifth-rate, HMS *Rainbow*, was entirely rebuilt and armed solely with carronades. The experiment proved a failure. The Smasher was too short-ranged and too violent for use in a full broadside, and the idea was dropped.

By 1812, the larger frigates mounted as many as forty-four guns, very necessary in view of the superior armament of American vessels.

The smallest frigate or sixth-rate was still known as a 'post-ship', being the smallest command given to a post-captain.

How else was a man-of-war judged? A captain could spend a small fortune decorating his figurehead and the carved scrollwork around the stern of his ship with gold paint, hence the expression 'the gilt on the gingerbread', in the hope that his admiral would consider a smart ship an efficient one. However, most ships were judged not by their firepower and their paintwork but by their boats. A ship's boats were her only real

means of contact with other vessels and senior officers, and were essential to the general running of her daily affairs in harbour or at anchor. Some captains might be prepared to keep their ships' companies in the clothes they were wearing when they were dragged aboard by the press gangs rather than dig deeply into the purser's stores, the slops, before it was absolutely necessary, but a boat's crew, under the eyes of the whole squadron or fleet, was something very different. Appearance was everything: smart jackets and white trousers, tarred hats, some with the ship's name carefully painted above the brim, a habit which was not generally introduced until Victoria's navy. The captain of the *Blazer*, for instance, paid to have his gig's crew dressed in jackets of blue and white stripes. It is claimed that the present-day garment derived its name from this. Good oarsmen and a dedicated coxswain marked the approach of most important craft, be it the captain's gig or the admiral's barge.

At sea the boats were stacked in tiers on the main deck; in action they were cast adrift, harnessed to a sea-anchor to await collection by the victor.

They were used, too, for the bloody business of close-action, boarding enemy ships while they lay unaware at anchor, cutting them out, and taking their prizes to sea before the alarm could be raised. Dirk, axe and cutlass were the tools of cutting-out raids, but the heavier boats often mounted swivel guns on their bows in case they were forced to stand away and cover their retreat.

The crews were trained and seasoned hands, men who could be trusted in all situations, often out of sight of authority, when others might be tempted to desert.

A small enough command, perhaps. But a young midshipman serving under Nelson once wrote to his mother, 'Today I was given command of the jolly boat. It is my proudest time!'

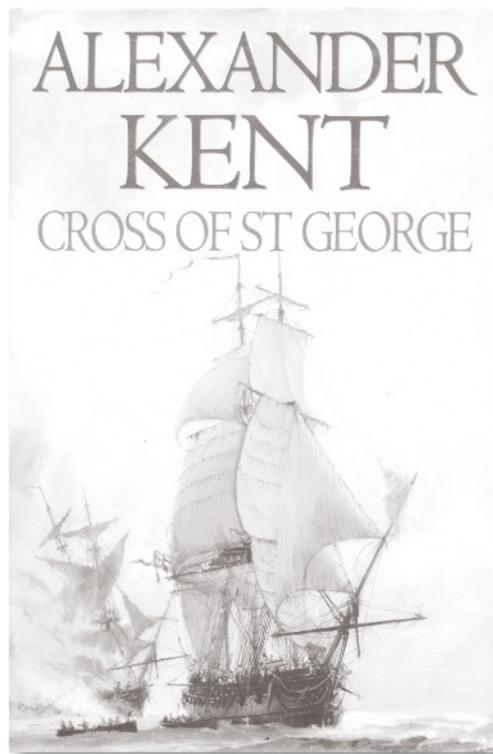
So shall a ship be judged.

## Part Four

### *Cross of St. George*

**I**n the bitter February of 1813, with convoys from Canada to the Caribbean falling victim to American privateers, Sir Richard Bolitho returns to Halifax to pursue a war he knows cannot be won, but which neither Britain nor the United States can afford to lose.

After nearly thirty years of almost continuous conflict with the old enemy, France, England and her admiral desire only peace. But peace will not be found in these icy waters where a young, angry nation asserts its identity, and men who share a common heritage die in close and bloody action. Nor is there peace for those who follow the cross of St George: not for the embittered Adam, mourn-



ing the loss of his lover and his ship, nor for Rear-Admiral Valentine Keen, who remains strangely indifferent to responsibility. Nor will there be peace for those who use this struggle between nations as an instrument of personal revenge.

