



## CHAPTER ONE

# A large piece of plum cake

1748-1771

In the wars against France that began in 1793 and, with a short break in 1802, ended at Waterloo twenty-two years later, Britain had four supreme commanders in the field. By chance, each succeeded his predecessor for reasons of declining health (or death), and each emerged at a time when his special skills were exactly those needed, in exactly the right place.

The first of these was John Jervis, born in 1735 and by the start of the war already a vice-admiral. He had fought in the Seven Years' War against France which ended in 1763, and at Quebec had been entrusted with General Wolfe's dying message to his fiancée. By 1795 he was Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean fleet and his naval philosophy was beginning to stamp itself on a generation

of commanders. He was severe, demanding and a feared disciplinarian. He loathed corruption, disloyalty and cowardice, and his strategy for beating the French was to bring overwhelming naval force to bear against them, not just to keep them at bay but to destroy France as a sea power. Having lost control of the Mediterranean at the end of 1796, he defeated a Spanish fleet off Cape St Vincent in February 1797, then sent Nelson to victory at the battle of the Nile a year later. In 1799 he briefly retired from active service, once more assumed command of the Channel fleet, then finally became First Lord of the Admiralty in Henry Addington's government.

In this post he ruthlessly reformed naval administration and tackled the corruption then rife in the dockyards, but he was criticised by William Pitt for leaving the navy under-strength when war resumed in 1803. Nevertheless, he was given another active command in 1806 before finally retiring a year later at the age of seventy-one. He died in 1823. As supreme commander at sea, though, Earl St Vincent, as he then was, had effectively passed his baton to Nelson in 1798.

This son of a Norfolk parson, forty-one years old and already a famously wounded war hero, though with a very mixed record, was no great administrator like Jervis; still less a politician. He was a battle commander. His first great fleet engagement had been the battle of Cape St Vincent in 1797 under Jervis. Here, he brilliantly precipitated the action by plunging his ship *Captain* pell-mell into the enemy line. A year later he tracked down the French Mediterranean fleet at Aboukir Bay (in what became known as the battle of the Nile) and destroyed it, stranding Bonaparte and his army in Egypt and re-establishing British maritime control between Cadiz and Malta. In 1801 he fought another battle at Copenhagen; less necessary and less glorious, but equally effective in stamping British naval supremacy on the Baltic and North Sea which was so vital for trade.

After the illusory Peace of Amiens in 1802, the next three years concentrated the navy's purpose: to prevent, at all costs, invasion by Napoleon's army of England. The trick was at one and the same time to bottle the enemy up in her ports, and tempt her to come out and fight the decisive battle at a time and place of the Royal Navy's choosing. The Long Watch, as it was called, ended in overwhelming victory at Trafalgar. That battle is popularly thought to have destroyed forever the French maritime threat. It did nothing of the sort. But at the precise moment of Nelson's death the mantle of supreme battle commander fell on the shoulders of the fifty-seven-year-old Cuthbert Collingwood.

For the next four and a half years he blockaded, chased, outwitted; took, burnt and attempted to destroy the ships of the French fleet to ensure that Bonaparte did not regain control of the Mediterranean. He supported the Spanish uprising, prevented Sicily from falling into French hands, kept Turkey and Russia neutral, policed the Adriatic (and while he was at it stood by to rescue the Pope from Rome and the Archduke of Austria from Trieste). And all the while he had to deal with the bloody and incestuous politics of North Africa. These tasks required a man with skills that went far beyond those of a battle commander. Collingwood had to be both diplomat and statesman, in effect a viceroy, and it happened that he was the only man in the navy (apart, perhaps, from Saumarez in the Baltic, performing a similar role, though on a smaller scale) who could have carried it off.

At the point of his death, in March 1810, and by one of those ironies with which history is littered, the focus of the war moved from sea to land, from east to west; the Sepoy General Arthur Wellesley emerged as the surgeon who would lance Bonaparte's Spanish ulcer and later, as the Iron Duke, ultimately defeat him on the continent of Europe.

The reputations of Wellington and Nelson speak for themselves. Nelson was a professional hero, Wellington a soldier/statesman in the tradition of Marlborough. St Vincent is not nearly so popularly known as his achievements deserve; but he is at least recognised by serious historians as a major influence on British maritime strategy during the Napoleonic wars. Neglect of Collingwood is harder to fathom, though the historian Piers Mackesy, writing of the war in the Mediterranean at this period, did not underestimate him:

The splendour of the navy's work in the theatre after Trafalgar has been obscured by the absence of fleet actions; and the name of Lord Collingwood has equally been dimmed by his inability to bring an enemy fleet to battle. The fights were small, fierce encounters of sloops and gunboats, cutting-out expeditions, attacks on batteries. Only once did the enemy come out in force. Yet the scale was heroic; and over the vast canvas towers the figure of Collingwood.<sup>1</sup>

Wellington was the son of an earl, learning his craft on the playing fields of Eton, and in India in the Mahratta wars. But in an era when birth mattered at least as much as talent, it is remarkable that St Vincent, Nelson and Collingwood all came from much more ordinary backgrounds, and all went to sea at the same age. St Vincent was the son of a politically unconnected barrister, who gave the young John Jervis £20 at the age of thirteen – but never a penny more after that – and sent him off to join the navy. His poverty as a midshipman meant that he spent more time on the lower decks than he did with other officers. His education was a practical one: years and years of apprenticeship at sea.

Nelson's family were genteel country folk. They had no wealth, but there were useful connections, through the Suckling family – Nelson's uncle Maurice was a Comptroller of the Navy – and the Walpoles. Without this influence Nelson could not have been made

post-captain at the extraordinarily young age of twenty. Even so, he served his time in the midshipman's berth from his early teens, and one of his outstanding traits as a commander was his understanding of both officers and men.

Cuthbert Collingwood's family had no money, but they were from ancient Northumbrian stock. An earlier Sir Cuthbert had been involved in the Reiver wars of the late sixteenth century, at a time when the Anglo-Scottish border was ruled, if that is the right word, by rival warlords and their clans. These were hard people, used to fighting and robbing and sleeping with one eye open. Sir Cuthbert Collingwood was a man of some consequence, able to raise eight hundred or even a thousand men to go raiding against families with whom he was feuding. He was kidnapped on one occasion by a Scots war party after a raid went horribly wrong, but he was not averse to meting out justice to his own: he executed seventeen of his tenants to prevent another feud from starting.<sup>2</sup>

One of his descendants, George Collingwood, was heavily implicated in the Jacobite rebellion of 1715: he was executed at Liverpool and his Eslington estate was forfeited, in a nice irony, to the Greenwich Hospital for Seamen. The Admiral's side of the family had never been anything other than loyal Hanoverians. His father, also Cuthbert, was a Newcastle trader, respectable but not wealthy. He had been apprenticed to a merchant, and then set up in business for himself. When the business went bankrupt, his debtors were distillers, oil-men, soap-boilers and druggists.<sup>3</sup> His wife, Milcah, who hailed from near Appleby in Westmoreland, bore him ten children.<sup>4</sup>

The first seven of these were girls, of whom three survived into adulthood and ripe old age: Mary (1738–1815), Eleanor (1739–1835) and Dorothy (1741–1830). The last three were boys: Cuthbert, born on 26 September 1748; Wilfred, baptised on 11 October 1749, and

John, baptised on 1 June 1750.<sup>5</sup> The choice of the first two boys' names is interesting. Cuthbert was clearly a family name, but it harked back to a very ancient period, when St Cuthbert, the exemplar of the ascetic monk, was a reluctant Bishop of Lindisfarne. St Wilfred was a seventh-century contemporary: Bishop of Hexham, but of an entirely different stamp. While Cuthbert had been brought up in the spiritual, insular Irish tradition of Iona, Wilfred was a Romanist who sought to reflect God's glory in his own earthly splendour. It was Wilfred whose counsel prevailed at the Synod of Whitby in AD 664, spelling the end of the Irish church in Britain. The two naval brothers were, by all accounts,<sup>6</sup> as different as these two in character, but they were held together by the bond of a service which was at least not riven by doctrinal dispute.

Cuthbert Collingwood was born in a house in Newcastle on a street called the Side. It is a steep, narrow street that runs up from the Quayside at Sandhill, past Dog Leap Stairs, up under the shadow of the medieval Black Gate, and towards the fourteenth-century cathedral of St Nicholas, where Cuthbert was baptised. The houses were all torn down in the nineteenth century, at which time the Collingwoods' house belonged to a tobacco manufacturer, but above a doorway of the Victorian redbrick office which stands there now is a bust of Cuthbert, Lord Collingwood, which most natives of the city pass by without noticing. The house lay within a biscuit's toss of city walls which had last been manned against the Scots as recently as 1745. Just two years before Cuthbert was born, the last battle on British soil had been fought at Culloden, and Geordies (a name derived from the army nickname King George's Men) would have been well aware that one of the prime objectives of the Young Pretender's attempted invasion of England was to strangle the coal trade between Newcastle and London by taking that city.

Newcastle in 1748 was still essentially a medieval city. At its heart

lay the ‘new’ castle built by William the Conqueror’s son Robert in 1080, after ten years of rebellion and destruction had laid waste most of the northern counties. For the next six hundred years Newcastle was a border town, garrisoned by the King’s troops against the threat of invasion from Scotland. In 1644 it held out under siege for three months before being taken by Parliamentary troops, and for two years after that the counties of Northumberland and Durham were occupied by Scottish forces.

In 1748 the city still had walls which entirely enclosed it, from Close Gate and Westgate in the west to Sand Gate in the east, from the River Tyne in the south to Newgate and Pilgrim Street in the north.<sup>7</sup> During Collingwood’s lifetime most of the walls would disappear as the town boomed in the early wealth of the industrial revolution. Ancient houses would be torn down to build grand new streets; bridges would span wooded denes; street lights, mains water and sewers would appear. Cuthbert would miss most of it.

In 1748 the castle dungeon was still being used as the county gaol, where prisoners were chained to the walls and exhibited by the gaoler for twopence a piece. The Side, where the Collingwoods lived, was close enough to the Quayside, an infamous haunt of ‘coarse and impudent wenches’,<sup>8</sup> to be primarily mercantile. It was ‘from one end to the other filled with shops of merchants, goldsmiths, milliners, and upholsterers’.<sup>9</sup> The Quayside itself was permanently ranged with vessels of every kind: keels, which carried coal from upriver down to sea-going colliers near the river’s mouth at Shields; coasters, barges, sloops, fishing cobsles and ferry boats. From the bottom of the Side, beneath the towering walls of the castle, a single bridge spanned the river to Gateshead and the Great North Road. This ancient bridge, like that of medieval London, was still lined with shops and houses. Across it, once a week, the South Mail coach would come, ‘guarded by a man before

on horseback with a drawn sword and, behind, by another with a charged blunderbuss'.<sup>10</sup>

Since 1711 Newcastle had boasted a newspaper: the *Courant*, joined by the *Journal* in 1739. Newspapers would be read by subscribers, very often shared amongst the patrons of dozens of coffee houses (more numerous even than today), and merchants kept a very close eye on news from across the world. Regional papers of the eighteenth century were necessarily less parochial in outlook than their modern equivalents. Parliamentary debates were frequently reported in great detail. In the week Collingwood was born in 1748 the paper contained dispatches from St Petersburg, Rome, Dresden, Stettin and elsewhere, wherever there were British interests – which indeed spread across the world.<sup>11</sup> There was a report that nineteen privateers had sailed from 'Havannah', and there was anticipation that peace might soon be signed with France and Spain at Aix-la-Chapelle. The paper also contained news that locusts had appeared in Orkney, and that at the Assembly Room in Durham there was to be a concert on the Cymbalum, the only instrument of its kind in England. There were advertisements too: for Daffy's Elixir and Dr Bateman's Pectoral Drops.

Newcastle was on the cusp of great things. Although the town had been shipping coal to London for hundreds of years, the engineering achievements that would liberate the region's latent wealth were in their barest infancy, supporting a population of only twenty thousand people and as yet untarnished by industrial pollution, labour strikes and unemployment. John Wesley, building in Newcastle the second Methodist chapel in England in 1742, liked it very much: 'If I did not believe there was another world I should spend all my summers here.'<sup>12</sup> Coal was plentiful and still easy to win at shallow depths: Daniel Defoe reported his impressions of 'Mountains of Coal' to an ignorant London audience. Getting the coal to the river



was another matter: for miles around, the countryside was laced with wooden wagon ways, the coal hauled by horses across the world's first 'railway' bridges and embankments to reach the Tyne and the Wear. The North's first coking plant had just been opened at Chester-le-Street, and where Thomas Newcomen's 'atmospheric' steam engines were in use, they were used for pumping water: either out of mines, or from streams into millponds to keep water-wheels turning.

Coal export from the River Tyne was still primarily aimed at the domestic market in London. Its use as the power to drive the steam age would have to wait for developments in steam engineering and iron-making technology. The lush pastures and easily tilled glacial soils of Northumberland's hills and plains, for so long neglected because of border warfare, had yet to become, as they soon would, the most productive land on the planet. And the region's greatest resource, its engineers, were either infants or had not been born. The main impetus behind these developments would be war.

Apart from twenty years of relative peace during the reigns of George I and George II, the major powers of Europe had been in more or less constant conflict during the eighteenth century. France's chief area of interest was its trading colonies in the West Indies, America and Canada, settlements in India, and the protection of its trade in the Mediterranean. Spain was concerned primarily with South America and the West Indies. The Dutch also had colonies in the West Indies, but more importantly in the East: India and the Spice Islands. Great Britain, reliant even more heavily than its rivals on maritime links, had interests in all those areas. The result was a series of wars, some under the guise of dynastic squabbles, in which these four great powers sought to keep their existing investments, and expand their interests at the inevitable expense of the others. At various times these wars involved all the other powers of Europe:

Denmark, Sweden, Russia, Austria, all linked by complicated familial and political ties, and all seeking to exploit the resources increasingly available through international maritime expansion.

Exploration, colonisation and trade were all primarily naval achievements, and it was through naval power that such trading colonies were protected. North America and Canada offered tobacco and fur and a growing export market; the West Indies were exploited for sugar, and to the south there was gold in seemingly limitless quantities. To the east, from India and beyond, there were spices and silks. Increasingly, too, Africa was being exploited for its minerals and for its supply of slaves, to be employed in America and the West Indies on plantations.

In 1756, when Cuthbert Collingwood was eight, a simmering conflict with France over tensions in Canada and New England was brought to a European boil: by threatening invasion of England, France aimed to tie down a British navy consisting of three hundred ships and seventy thousand fighting men.<sup>13</sup> Although France's plans caused panic in Britain, the attempt was a feint. A more convenient target was selected. In 1756 the French fleet at Toulon carried an invasion army to Menorca and captured the island. What must the eight-year-old Collingwood have thought when it was reported that Admiral John Byng, having failed to prevent the invasion, was to be court-martialled and shot for cowardice? Twenty years later Collingwood would twice be court-martialled himself.

It can hardly have been Byng's fate that decided Collingwood on a naval career. As the oldest son he might be tempted, or expected, to follow his father into business as a trader, except that the business was going bust. He could otherwise have joined the merchant marine, where he might travel the world and where the pay, if one survived, was good. He must have had many opportunities to talk to sailors along the Quayside in Newcastle and it is hard to imagine

that exotic items brought from across the world failed to stir his imagination.

There was no great naval connection in the family, although Cuthbert's mother's sister had married Richard Braithwaite, who was a frigate captain. Something, though, must have enthused the three brothers: Wilfred, the second son, was to join the navy too. He served with distinction alongside his older brother and their friend Horatio Nelson in the West Indies, before dying at the age of thirty-eight. John joined the customs service and outlived the rest of his family, dying in 1841 at the age of ninety-one.

Perhaps it was the events of the year 1759 that determined them, the year Collingwood turned eleven. This may have been the year<sup>14</sup> that he attended the Royal Grammar School at Newcastle, along with the two Scott brothers who later became Lords Eldon and Stowell. Known in their day as the Head School, its headmaster was Hugh Moises, a hard but highly capable teacher whose traditional curriculum was classically based: 'Latin was the meat course and salads and desserts were few.'<sup>15</sup> It was drummed into young boys using a combination of authority, passion and flogging. It has been said by all of Collingwood's biographers that his character was formed under this determined administration, but the school's archivist insists that Collingwood did not attend for more than about six months. Unfortunately, all the school's records from that period have been lost during a series of relocations. Certainly Collingwood cannot have attended beyond the age of thirteen, because by then he was at sea with Captain Braithwaite.

The Year of Victories, as 1759 came to be called, was a turning point for the fortunes of the British in the Seven Years' War with France. Its architect was Admiral Lord George Anson, famous for his circumnavigation of the globe in the 1740s and for his naval victories against the French and Spanish, and subsequently First Lord

of the Admiralty. By 1759 he had engineered a service that was the largest industrial organisation in the western world and so efficient, despite its many shortcomings, that it could operate in every potential theatre of war simultaneously.<sup>16</sup>

In May it was reported that a British force operating in the West Indies, having failed to take and hold Martinique, had successfully landed on Guadeloupe and captured it from the French. In August the Duke of Brunswick defeated the French army at Minden. That same month, rumours of an invasion fleet had British squadrons patrolling the Channel ports and French Atlantic coast, and the famous Cornishman Admiral Boscawen, reacting to a report that a French squadron had left Toulon and been seen making its way through the Strait of Gibraltar, pursued them into Lagos Bay on the south-west tip of Portugal and defeated them, taking three ships and burning two others.

There was another, less decisive victory in September when Admiral Pocock won a bloody face-off with a French squadron off Pondicherry in south-east India. In October came dramatic news that General Wolfe's expedition up the St Lawrence River had finally come to fruition with the storming of the Heights of Abraham and subsequent capture of Quebec. Wolfe had died heroically.

Finally, in November, Admiral Hawke had come up with his French counterpart Conflans in Quiberon Bay off the west coast of France. In a gale of shocking force, and navigating through treacherous shoals in almost reckless pursuit, Hawke's squadron drove three French ships on shore and two others foundered, while one was captured – her value, in accordance with naval tradition, being divided among the victorious crews as prize money.

One by one, though not necessarily in chronological order, these victories were reported in the *Newcastle Courant*. Eighteenth-century news was always dislocated from events by a combination of tide,

weather, distance and a variety of other fates. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of these victories on the public was electrifying, and it is easy to imagine how the eleven-year-old Cuthbert and his younger brothers might decide they wanted to emulate their heroes.

Hero-worship was not the only reason for a young man to go to war. To begin with, no family with money or land would let the oldest son join the navy: there was too great a risk of him dying and leaving no one to inherit title or business. But Collingwood senior, who let both his oldest sons join, had little in the way of business to pass on, given what in the eighteenth century was the liability of three adult sisters to be provided for. In such impoverished circumstances few other professions were open to them. The law, the army and business all required capital. A career in the navy had its dangers, but it required very little in the way of financial input, and had at least the surety of a career structure. Boys who left home young cost nothing to keep, less to educate.

Apart from the glory that might one day come his way, there is no doubt that a young boy would have heard of prize money: the value of a captured enemy ship shared by the entire victorious crew or crews, but distributed very much in favour of the officers.<sup>17</sup> Collingwood himself would earn little in the way of prize money until Trafalgar, but he died leaving more than £160,000 to his daughters.<sup>18</sup> It may also be that the prospect of a life at sea, full of adventure, seemed more attractive than the favours of his headmaster, just as today the prospect of a career of fame and fortune, however illusory, seduces small boys into believing that a scout from a Premiership football club is watching them practise in the park. Nor should one forget aspects of eighteenth-century culture that seem faintly strange today: duty and service. Collingwood may very well have grown up asking himself how he might best serve his country.

In 1761 Cuthbert's father paid £30 for him to volunteer, probably as a servant, to Captain Braithwaite aboard *Shannon*, a 600-ton 28-gun frigate (very like Jack Aubrey's beloved *Surprise*). This type of ship, known as a 'jackass' frigate, was by this time considered too small to be of much use as a fighting ship. It was a true ship (that is, it had three masts, was square-rigged, and was commanded by a post-captain) and although it might have sailing qualities that could be described as nimble, its armament was too light for it to take on anything much larger than itself. *Shannon* had an internal length of about 110 feet and a beam of just over 30 feet. She carried fourteen nine-pounder guns to a side on a single deck, throwing a broadside weight – the mass of shot she could discharge in one round from one side – of 126lbs. This compared to the broadside of a first-rate line of battle ship, of something over 1,500lbs in a single discharge. *Shannon's* crew numbered about two hundred, of which eighteen were officers, divided into those who held commissions (the captain and two lieutenants) and those who held warrants: master, boatswain, gunner, carpenter, surgeon and so on. Their mates, and the four midshipmen, were ratings, without warrant or commission.

As a volunteer, the thirteen-year-old Collingwood had a theoretical career laid out for him. He was both an apprentice seaman and an apprentice officer. To begin with he would be taught to hand, reef and sail: to learn the ropes (more than thirty miles of them, even in a frigate) and their very technical, sometimes arcane names: shrouds, ratlines, cross catharpins, futtocks, timenoguys and the like. Most future officers would be given into the care of a 'mother' or 'sea-daddy', an old and preferably wise seaman of infinite experience, who would teach them the niceties of knotting and splicing, sewing and shipboard etiquette, and protect them from the worst of any bullying that went on. Forty years later one of Collingwood's own midshipmen, Robert Hay, described the process:

It was my lot to fall into the hands of Jack Gillies, than whom a handier fellow never left the Emerald Isle. The cutting out and making of jackets, shirts and trousers, the washing of them when soiled, and the mending of them neatly when they began to fail, took precedence ... From the knotting of a rope yarn to the steering of a ship under bare poles in a tiffoon, Jack excelled in all.<sup>19</sup>

Collingwood did not instantly become a midshipman the day he arrived in *Shannon*. Midshipman was a rating, not a commission. To become midshipmen (variously known as snotties, monkeys or more significantly young gentlemen) and thus have the right to walk on the holy quarterdeck, wear a dirk and order men to be punished, volunteers had to show that they were capable of bearing the responsibility that went with the rating. A mid' would have to earn respect from men old enough to be his father. Collingwood would be at sea for five years before he was rated midshipman.

His first biographer, and son-in-law, G. L. Newnham-Collingwood, told an old family story of Collingwood's first days after he joined *Shannon*. One of the lieutenants found him crying from homesickness. Although lieutenants were duty-bound to toughen up their recruits, this man comforted Collingwood, and in return was taken to his sea chest and given a large piece of plum cake.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that this lieutenant was William Smith, who until 1758 had been gunner in the *Alcide* before being promoted into *Shannon*.<sup>21</sup> This was an unusual though not a unique move.

A lieutenancy was the first promotional step between midshipman and admiral, the long ladder of an officer's career. A lieutenant's commission could only be awarded as a result of the man passing a stiff examination in seamanship and navigation before the Admiralty Board and on him having served six years at sea, two of them in the navy as midshipman or master's mate. Even then, especially in peacetime, such was the competition for places that many aspiring officers,

having passed their exams, remained midshipmen or master's mates for their entire careers. If they were lucky, in the time-honoured and well-understood tradition of the navy, midshipmen became lieutenants, then commanders, then post-captains and finally, if they lived long enough, admirals.

Each step up the ladder called for a number of attributes. One was ability: not just seamanship, but man-management skills which, in a man-of-war where death was a constant prospect, were vital. If men were not prepared to follow an officer's orders because he was stupid or incompetent or tyrannical, they could make his life very difficult indeed. Another was 'interest', or patronage. It was hard to advance solely by merit. Some sort of influence was essential in so competitive a career. The influence might be familial or political or both, or it might radiate from one's own commanding officer. A third requirement was combat. A spectacular wound acquired in action, leading a boarding party, or being given command of a captured enemy ship were persuasive badges of merit. This may well be how William Smith advanced from being gunner – a warrant officer with no commission – to lieutenant, though his promotion would have required him to pass the examination and have his promotion officially endorsed by the Admiralty. Petty officers and warrant officers could be disgraced; commissioned lieutenants could not, except by court-martial.

After his lieutenancy, an officer would hope to be made master and commander, probably in charge of a sloop. He was then called captain by courtesy, but did not appear on the holy list of post-captains. Once an officer became a post-captain, his position was almost inviolate. From playing at snakes and ladders, he was now on a conveyor belt which led to the hoisting of an admiral's flag, and which only death or disgrace could rob him of.

Within a year of Collingwood joining *Shannon*, George III had



acceded to the throne, and a year after that, in 1763, peace was signed with France. With no prospect of war ahead, and with no influence other than that of a frigate captain, Collingwood's chances of promotion were slim: he would spend fourteen years learning the ropes. He did so in six different ships. Only a few months after joining *Shannon*, during which time he saw service, but no action, in Atlantic and Home waters, escorting convoys to the Baltic, he joined another ship. Braithwaite transferred into *Gibraltar*, an even smaller frigate of 24 guns, and took Collingwood with him as one of his followers. *Gibraltar* must have been known to Collingwood by reputation, because in 1759, during the Year of Victories, she had been the ship which first sighted the enemy squadrons before both Lagos and Quiberon Bay. It gave her a certain cachet.

In *Gibraltar* Collingwood saw service again in Home and Atlantic waters, and also made his first voyage to the Mediterranean. Britain had bases at Gibraltar and Menorca, returned under the terms of the Treaty of Paris which had ended the Seven Years' War and confirmed France's withdrawal from Canada, Nova Scotia, Dominica, Grenada and Tobago.

We know very little of Collingwood's early experiences; his first letter home dates from 1776. It is not even known what leave, if any, he had during that time, or whether he saw his family at all. In all probability he did not, but one experience from this time was recorded. Many years later, when Collingwood was a senior captain, once again serving in the Mediterranean, he was stationed in Corsica. In a letter home he reflected that the last time he had visited that island, serving on board *Gibraltar*, it had left a lasting impression on him:

A more miserable prospect than that island presents is scarce to be conceived of, the most savage country, barren brown mountains,

rearing their rugged, wrinkled, heads to the skies: the valleys produce a little corn, bad wine and olives, but the barbarians who inhabit there have not industry to cultivate any of them. Their manners are savage, their ignorance is gross, but the part of their character of most consequence to us is the inveterate hatred they on all occasions express to the English. Every man of them travels in the country with a rifle, a gun and a dagger, with which he kills with admirable dexterity such game or Englishmen as he may chance to meet in his way – the ships of war have lost several men stabbed by those fellows – and do it with the same composure that an old butcher kills a pig. The *Gibraltar* had four seamen stabbed the last time they were there, three of them died.<sup>22</sup>

By 1766, still in *Gibraltar*, Collingwood had been rated as a midshipman, in his eighteenth year. This reflects the lack of opportunity open to a sailor in peace time rather than a lack of talent. His skills as a seaman were already maturing. There was nothing simple about sailing a square-rigged ship, even one as comparatively small as a jackass frigate. To begin with, knowing a ship's position and how to calculate its course was a hybrid art somewhere between the rarefied mathematics of spherical trigonometry and the finely honed intuition that allowed dead-reckoning to be estimated from a log towed behind the ship every hour, a rough calculation of wind speed and direction, and a guess at leeway, currents and tides. At that very time the voyages of James Cook to the Pacific were just beginning to show that chronometers could give an accurate idea of longitude, but even so reading the positions of sun and moon relied on clear skies. Even the sextant was a relatively recent invention.

All square-rigged vessels, and especially men-of-war, were a compromise design. Frigates, especially, had to be fast and point as close to the wind as possible, though no square-rigged ship could sail closer than sixty-seven degrees to the direction of the wind – regardless of

leeway, the tendency for the ship to drift sideways. But to hold enough stores for a long commission a frigate had to be broad in the beam, and to access the smallest harbours she needed a shallow draught. Neither of these factors enhanced her sailing qualities. Nor did the fact that in order to be an effective ship of war she had to function as a mobile battery, mounting as many guns as her frame would take, with as low a centre of gravity as possible.

All competent sailors had a deep knowledge of these factors and how they affected each ship. And each ship, with its particular arrangement of masts, sails and rigging, responded differently. Square-rigged ships generally sailed best with the wind on their quarter, coming from behind midships, but not directly astern. With the wind coming from forward of midships the square rig was a disadvantage: fore-and-aft-rigged ships, like modern racing yachts, are at their best with the wind forward, because their sails act like aerofoils pulling them through the water, and the best fore-and-aft-rigged ships can sail very close to the wind indeed. With a square rig it was necessary to make the sails as stiff as possible to mimic this effect. The leading or weather edge of the sail was pulled as tight as possible with bowlines, while the lee edge of the sail was pulled tight with tacks. The yards from which the sails hung were braced round as close as possible to a fore-and-aft position, and under those conditions the ship could point upwind, tacking or wearing as necessary to gain sea mileage.

The thirty or so miles of rope and cordage that a frigate employed in sailing had two main functions. The standing rigging supported and braced the masts from the front, back and sides. The running rigging was used to manage the sails. Each of the three masts had a possible ten or so sails: on the main mast, for example, the lowest sail was called the main course or main sail. Above that was the main topsail, above that the main topgallant, then the main

royal. Extra sails called studding sails might be bent to booms which could be extended on either side of the yards. The foremast was smaller but with a similar arrangement. The mizen mast bore a fore-and-aft sail – the mizen – and above that a topsail and topgallant sail. Forward of the foremast, jibs (hung from stays between the foremast and the bowsprit) were rigged fore and aft, and below the bowsprit extra sails called spritsails could be rigged.

Every combination of these sails, their effects under every type of condition and their relative merits, had to be familiar to any experienced sailor – most able-seamen would be able to sail a frigate with perfect confidence. Collingwood was no exception, and as a midshipman part of his training was learning to manage the two hundred men on the ship as they executed all her possible manoeuvres, each of which required more or less perfect co-ordination to accomplish successfully. Failure to carry out a manoeuvre competently could result in shipwreck or – possibly worse – humiliation. The next, the supreme level of naval competence and skill, Collingwood did not acquire until he was forty-five years of age: the unimaginable, to a modern mind, difficulty of sailing a ship and fighting her at the same time in battle.

The year after he was rated midshipman Collingwood transferred into *Liverpool*, another 28-gun frigate, and by 1770 had been made master's mate, a senior rating for a prospective officer looking towards his lieutenancy. A master's mate was a midshipman with special responsibilities for navigation, assisting the sailing master (the senior warrant officer) with bearings, charts and laying courses. But in addition to these duties he would have responsibilities for a division of the ship's company and would take watches. Fortunately a copy of Collingwood's own log during his time in *Liverpool* remains in the possession of his family. It is the first of his writings that survives. As a narrative it lacks pace, to be sure, but its language,

drily understated, and its bare recording of hurricanes and floggings, endless tacking and wearing, taking on stores and mending rigging, preserves an image of eighteenth century naval life that has great vitality.

The first entry is dated Saturday 8 December 1770. *Liverpool* had passed through the Strait of Gibraltar and was heading north-east towards the Balearic Islands. At sea, each day was given a full page of the log, organised into two twelve- hour sections and beginning, in accordance with naval tradition, at noon. Against each hour is a record of the ship's speed, her course, the wind direction, and any remarks. It is laid out with a draughtsman's precision, for Collingwood had an artist's eye as well as a scientific mind. Thus:

Saturday 8th December 1770

1 [o'clock] 3 [knots] 4 [fathoms] [course] NE [wind] ENE Fresh gales and cloudy weather.

Later that day:

Fresh gales and mizzling rain, handed the mizen top sail, and wore ship.

When in port, Collingwood wrote entries in a more diaristic style, recording the mostly administrative events of the ship's life. On 10 December *Liverpool* arrived at Port Mahon, in Menorca. It was probably Collingwood's first visit there. He may have been to Menorca in *Gibraltar*, but on this voyage he recorded pilotage information such as bearings to prominent landmarks, and drew an elegant map of the harbour, with the names of various islands and watering places marked with depth soundings. These suggest it was a new experience for him. On 11 December he recorded that they opened a cask of beef which contained 190 pieces (two short). They hove up the first bower anchor and let go the second bower in

its place. The ship's company were employed in watering (filling barrels of fresh water from the nearest springs) and mending the topgallant sails after a recent gale. On the 13th they weighed anchor and set sail for Algier Bay, where they bought bullocks and Collingwood had time to make a careful map of that harbour with soundings.

And so the entries run, day after day. On Christmas Day Cape de Gatte was sighted WNW ten leagues off, and the slings of the cross-jack yard broke and had to be mended. New Year was spent in Gibraltar Bay attending to the rigging and taking in stores and water. Three weeks later they were back in Port Mahon, firing a 28-gun salute for the Queen's birthday. On this visit they careened the ship. This was a major exercise, and Mahon one of the few harbours where it could be carried out. It involved removing everything from the ship: rigging, stores, iron and shingle ballast, guns, top masts, hen coops, the lot. This took twelve days, during which time Alexander Dunn and his mate George (Collingwood does not record their rank, but they were either ordinary or able seamen) absented themselves from duty and were given eighteen and twelve lashes apiece. Careening started on the 31st. To accomplish this, the ship, with only her lower masts left standing, was heeled over by means of cables wound on to capstans mounted on shore, to expose half her bottom. The hull was scraped clean of weed and barnacles, checked for rot, and her copper (if she was coppered) repaired where necessary. Then she was hove upright again, turned round, and the other side would be cleaned. By 5 March she was rerigged, refitted, and with stores taken on ready to sail again.

Britain was not at war, so there are many entries in which foreign ships are encountered and 'spoke to'. Collingwood's remarks are generally confined to the weather, to punishments, and the mostly humdrum business of everyday life aboard a frigate. At Leghorn

(Livorno) he was amused to see a Tuscan man-of-war fire a salute of thirteen guns to a chapel of St Mary as she left port: a ‘remarkable instance of blind superstition by which they implore the protection of the Virgin’, he wrote in the log.

By now, at the age of twenty-two, Collingwood was a highly experienced seaman. His remarks are intelligent and he takes a keen interest in all aspects of navigation as well as sailing. There are silhouettes of every significant cape or port entrance, and after one entry there is a remarkable drawing of a ‘machine’ which he had thought up. It seems to be a jury-rigged rudder, to be constructed if the ship lost steerage. It involves an intricate arrangement of ropes, spars and planks, and comes with a detailed description of its practical applications. This was precisely the sort of resourceful, thinking seaman that the navy hoped to bring on.

In March there was a semblance of excitement when *Liverpool* entered Villa Franca (now Villefranche-sur-Mer, near Nice), firing an eleven-gun salute, and one of her men noticed that a Swedish snow (a large unarmed two-masted trading ship) had acquired the barge of an English man-of-war. It had apparently, but suspiciously, been found floating in the Gulf of Lyons. A request for its return was refused, so Braithwaite sent an armed party to retrieve it. This was British naval diplomacy in action: straightforward, effective, and allowing of no compromise.

The lack of real action must have been frustrating. Apart from there being no opportunity for prize money or promotion, this sort of commission involved tedious cruising between the ports of the western Mediterranean with little excitement. Things were enlivened in August 1771 when *Liverpool* visited Lisbon, only to have a gun from Belum Castle on the River Tagus fire two shots at her, one of which passed between the mizen and main masts: ‘an insult which the British flag never before received without satisfaction’. Some

months later, at Cadiz, they were refused fresh water and stores: 'an absolute infraction of the treaty which at present subsists between His Majesty and the Spanish court'. How much this precocious pomposity was Collingwood's own, and how much was part of the culture of the service is hard to say. It was a trait he carried to his death. The last frisson of this commission was felt when *Liverpool* ran aground in a very severe gale upon Diamond Rock, just outside Cadiz. They managed to 'throw all aback' and get her off. Without a war, this was about as much excitement as a sailor could expect.