



The Billy Ruffian

David Cordingly

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David Cordingly, a leading authority on pirates and maritime history, *The Billy Ruffian* is the story of a real-life H.M.S. Sophie, named Bellerophon, or Billy Ruffian as her crew called her, barnacles and all. Under fourteen captains, she played a conspicuous part in three of the most famous of all sea battles.

But her crowning glory came six weeks after the Battle of Waterloo, when Napoleon, trapped in Rochefort, surrendered to the captain of the ship that had dogged his steps for more than twenty years. Packed with letters, pictures, and first-hand accounts, *The Billy Ruffian* is an enthralling account of sea adventure.

The Billy Ruffian Details

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Author : David Cordingly

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Daniel says

This is an interesting and well researched text on the life of one of the many "Wooden Walls" of Britain that fended off Napoleon. The story of HMS Bellerophon is representative of the Royal Navy as a whole during this period. It is representative of many of the ships that protected Britain in the long struggle against Napoleon. The depictions of the naval battles (The Glorious First of June, The Nile, Trafalgar) are excellent, particularly in the description of the part Bellerophon played in them. The character sketches of the men who commanded and called her home, at least those who left some record, are fascinating. Bellerophon reached the height of her glory in 1815 as she and her captain was the representative of the British government to whom Napoleon surrendered. However, the laurels of glory are fleeting, as the mighty ship was humbled by its conversion into a prison hulk shortly after, an ignominious fate that would mark her later years. All in all, the story of this fighting ship follows the contours of human life from birth to the height of ability and glory and finally to the end, in Bellerophon's case in the breaker's yard in 1836.

This book is marred by a number of errors. First, it states the Adm Howe recaptured Gibraltar in 1782. Any historian of the War of Independence or the history of the 18th century Mediterranean should know that Gibraltar hasn't fallen to anyone since the British captured it in 1704. It also states, on several occasions, that Louis XVII took the French throne after Napoleon's abdication when it was Louis XVIII. Beyond this, I could recommend this book to any student of the Napoleonic period.

Jennifer says

This is a very well written account of the ship of the line, the 74 gun Bellerophon or the Billy Ruffian as the sailors called her. The author has a great narrative, going into detail but not getting bogged down in detail and using actual anecdotes from dispatches or letters from the sailors/officers on the Bellerophon which makes the battles very vivid to the reader. Even though I consider myself very knowledgeable about Britain's navy during the 7 Years War and Napoleonic wars, I didn't know much about Bellerophon.

For one, she was in the thick of all of the major battles of that era, the Glorious First of June, Battle of the Nile and the Battle of Trafalgar. The Bellerophon had a reputation for going after bigger ships than her due to her speed and got often mauled. In both Trafalgar and the Battle of Nile, she was completely dismasted and the sails and cordage shot away so badly that she had to be towed away from the battle once it finished. Secondly, the Bellerophon was known for the ship that intercepted Napoleon Bonaparte in Rochefort and brought him back to England in 1815.

I loved the beginning about how the ships of the line were built. I also understood another mystery. I knew that French built ships were much better than English built ships in terms of strength and speed. However, the British Navy in terms of battle were much better compared to the Spanish or French despite the poorer quality ships. The main reason was the British navy was very effective at blockading ports and escorting merchant convoys that were critical to support Britain's economy. Some of these blockades lasted years which kept the French and Spanish ships and sailors at port, which means that British sailors and officers were sailing in all kinds of conditions, practicing the guns regularly and they became an effective, well oiled war machine as a result.

Lastly, the one doesn't need a lot of knowledge about ships or sailing to understand, unlike some other nautical historical books I have read. Highly recommended for those who want to gain an insight to one of the most notable ship of the line in Britain's navy during the Napoleonic era.

David Bird says

This book is an attempt to tell the story of Nelson's navy from a fresh angle, and in that largely succeeds. *Bellerophon* was a Zelig-ship, present at Trafalgar, but also the ship to which Napoleon surrendered after Waterloo, when he entered British custody. Cordingley's description of the ship's later role as a prison hulk ties Nelson's navy to the world of *Great Expectations* and *The Fatal Shore*.

Gilly McGillicuddy says

What a cool idea to do a biography of a ship. It makes sense, of course, because the ship was everywhere, even if the captains changed. It was made just before the war broke out, built along the famous lines of the *Bellona*, present at the Glorious first, at the Nile, at Trafalgar, and most famously it was the ship in which Napoleon surrendered to Captain Maitland and was brought to England. For some reason it took me a while to finish, but then one can never spend too much time with Cordingley. I'm thinking of starting up a little fanclub.

Rob Godfrey says

Thoroughly enjoyed this one. There's just the right balance of narrative and technical detail to make a book that's interesting all the way through.

Jan-Maat says

Not a bad book, the subtitle is a crude attempt to have a famous name tow the unfamiliar one of this ship into the would be reader's consciousness which rather sells the central idea short - which is that this is a biography of a ship the *Bellerophon*, a 74 gun ship of the line, from construction to deconstruction, her moment of fame was that she was the ship that carried Napoleon to Britain after Waterloo, where he was transferred to the *Northumberland* which took him to St.Helena. This kind of title suggests both a lack of confidence on the part of author (or the publisher?) in the intrinsic interest in the story or, or maybe and, an absence of confidence in the buying public whose dulled senses need to be whipped into buying through the mention of some famous name (view spoiler) . However the biography of this ship, the *Bellerophon*, which also saw action, at Trafalgar & the Battle of the Nile among other battles, as well as undertaking other duties during the long wars against France - the book takes us through those, the descriptions of the battles I thought a real strength from how the ship was readied for action to the physical damage she endured (masts downed, rigging and sails ruined) has much to commend it to the curious reader. On the downside Nelson and Napoleon were distractions from the ship, (likewise that George III saw a theatre piece about Joan of Arc), if one wants to read about Nelson & Napoleon, one has I suspect, no immediate shortage of books to turn to, on the other hand if you want to know about a typical ship of the line of the period, then this is pretty much it. Although not relevant to the life-story of the ship, I did like Cordingley's description of Collingwood, who took command of the fleet after Nelson's demise, unable to tell any of the officers that Nelson was dead, for fear of also presenting them with the sight of his own inconsolable grief - all the fleet captains instead

were left to infer the news - a reminder that we are just at the tail end of the era of the man of feeling. Perhaps such a sense of man's emotions as bottomless chasms, required a fine surface performance of *sang froid*?

Anyway back to the ship, Cordingly traces her birth, from imaginative conception on the drawing board, to contract (to be constructed at a private yard, round the corner from the royal docks at Chatham (view spoiler) the process of scouring the countryside for suitable oak and elm, felled, carted to navigable rivers and hauled downstream, sawn into timbers (view spoiler) which were constructed into a hull. She then sat on the river Medway 'in mothballs' until called in to service when she was fitted out with guns and masts and rigging at Chatham and was ready to do her duty from 1786 to 1815 when she was converted into a prison hulk (view spoiler) until she was sold to a scrap yard for £4,030 in 1836, sadly the story ends there, we don't learn what became of the bulk of the hulk as she was reduced into her constituent parts.

On pages 209-212 there is a discussion of the make-up of the ship's crew, broken down into country of origin (22% of the crew were Welsh, there was one black man (country of origin unknown), the average height of the sailors was five foot five (being short an advantage at sea as there wasn't much headspace between decks), the oldest sailors were in their fifties, the average age thirty, curiously the captain also logged details about eye colour (view spoiler) and tattoos (also not detailed), sadly Cordingly doesn't put the composition of the crew in much of a context other than explaining the prevalence of men on board due to having been seized by press gangs and thus the mixture of trade backgrounds on board (view spoiler). I would have been glad to have read more on the typical crew of a ship in this period and less about Wellington's victories in India and the Iberian Peninsula.

Still quite fun, and the frequency that she had to be repaired in dock was remarkable, not just after battle but due to storm damage, and wear and tear too, while all the work was done by hand with the assistance of some cranes (and occasionally a dry dock). The ship's name came, allegedly, at random from Lempriere's classical dictionary, though since one of the hospital ships was named the *Charon* I wondered if some malicious humour wasn't also involved, at least at times. However the crew tended to pronounce *Bellerophon* as Billy Ruffian (hence the title of the book), or variants thereof.

There is a chapter on her life as a prison hulk off the north Kent marshes, haunting the imagination of young Dickens. Life on aboard the prison hulk was a parody of naval life, the prisoners were divided into messes of about eight, each of which shared one cage, they slept in hammocks which at dawn were stowed in lockers on deck, as in the service, one man from each mess had to fetch their rations to the mess, though they drank cocoa rather than grog, and they were supposed to work and learn chunks of the bible by heart in the belief that such knowledge of the tricks of the biblical patriarchs or the wars, bloodshed, and polygamy of the kings of ancient Israel would convert the depraved criminal into a decent Victorian. Unfortunately men and boys were mixed in the cells and the boys were prey to crimes 'to horrible to mention', under Prime Minister Melbourne there was a move to reduce the use of hulks in favour of transportation to Australia instead (view spoiler). Such was the life of a warship.

Ian Fraser says

I absolutely loved this book, but I am, admittedly, a Royal Navy history anorak! This book is a narrative of a crucial period in the history of the Royal Navy, including the Napoleonic Wars, when the RN was arguably at its peak. The narrative is cleverly told as a biography of a ship, from its birth in a shipyard in Rochester, in 1782, to its death in a breaker's yard in 1836, after several years of use as a prison hulk. The ship was HMS

Bellerophon, charmingly nicknamed by its crew "Billy Ruffian". Her career in the RN was both celebrated and crucial. She played a conspicuous part in the most famous sea battles of her era: the battle of The Glorious First of June (1794) which was the opening action against Revolutionary France; the Battle of The Nile (1798) which halted Napoleon's eastward expansion; and the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) during which her captain was shot dead by a sniper an hour before Nelson was fatally wounded. Her crowning glory came in 1815, six weeks after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. Trapped in Rochefort, Napoleon surrendered to the captain of the Bellerophon, throwing himself to the mercy of his "ever constant foe, the English". On Bellerophon Napoleon traveled to England, and was kept on board as a guest until his fate was decided, exile on St Helena. Utterly fascinating, and rich with details of the period taken from accounts and log books. There are valuable lessons for today to be learned, for individuals and organisations, about how to really focus on a few core strengths in order to excel. The RN prevailed not because the ships were any better, they weren't. A few simple principles and technical advantages were enough: fast and accurate gunnery; the extreme aggression of the officers; naval discipline; copper-bottomed ships; superior navigation. This was enough to ensure that the enemy was blockaded in their ports, with ships and crews rotting, whilst the RN practiced the arts of seamanship. The Royal Navy's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805, in which they lost no ships, and decimated the French navy, ensured that there was no serious competition for over a century. Nothing to hold back the growth of an Empire the likes of which had not been seen before or since. This book is a little gem, and an invaluable addition to the lexicon of this period.

Curtiss says

The career of H.M.S. Bellerophon, a 74-gun ship-of-the-line which formed part of England's "Wooden Walls" and fought in three of the most decisive sea battles of the late 18th and early 19th centuries: The battle of the Glorious First of June, won by Admiral Lord Howe against the fleet of Revolutionary France in 1794; The Battle of the Nile, won by Admiral Lord Nelson in 1798, which ended Napoleon's eastward ambitions; and the Battle of Trafalgar, won by Amiral Nelson against the combined fleets of Imperial France and Spain.

The final crowning glory for the old "Billy Ruffian" was when her commander Captain Maitland accepted the surrender of Emperor Napoleon Bonapart, six weeks after his final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo.

A stimulating look at the career of a ship which exemplified the professionalism and ultimate triumph of Britain's Royal Navy over the forces of continental despotism.

Tarquilla says

Interesting book packed full of facts and information.

Joseph Sellors says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book which I must admit surprised me somewhat. I expected to struggle with nautical terms and find a history of just on ship too specific but Cordingly does an incredible job bringing the plucky Bellerophon into context with the larger events of the time. The ship haunted Napoleon throughout his wars with Britain fighting at the glorious first of June, Trafalgar, the Nile and then playing the role of host to

Napoleon when he surrendered.

Michael says

Delightful. The biography of a ship which is a newer way of addressing Naval history. Some line of battle ships saw more history than Captains or their crew. The Bellerophon (Billy Ruffian) fought in the glorious 1st of June, the Nile, Trafalgar and carried Napoleon away from France on his final trip into exile.

What a history, what a ship!! This book followed the ship from construction to dismantling.

The narrative was strained at times and it was a little wordy.

The final chapter was full of too many Dickens quotes. Just give us the historical info and your impressions. The quotes didn't really fit in the final chapter, they were forced.

Shane Richardson says

Not enough stars for this book.

Nooilforpacifists says

A pleasant, easy read--the history of one of England's "Wooden Walls." Requires a bit of Napoleonic Naval background. Seemingly inconsistently, however, the book's flaw is that for large sections in the middle, it becomes a generalized history of the conflict. So, when Nelson's fleet first arrives in Alexandria, without spotting Napoleon, "We do not know how Captain Darby took the news." The book is far better when reporting on specific events, especially based on recollections of crewman or paintings of the famous ship. Bellerophon, of course, reaches the pinnacle of fame in its last days of active service: ferrying Napoleon from France to Torbay Harbor in England where the decision was made to exile the ex-Emperor in St Helena.

Worth a read for the Battle of the Nile and its most famous passenger.

Trawets says

David Cordingly gives us the complete history of the 74 gun British warship Bellerophon (her crew found her name difficult to pronounce) right from her design, the cutting down of the trees for her timbers, her birth on the Medway till her death in the breaker's yard over fifty years later. From 1782 to 1836 the Bellerophon took part in many of the most significant sea battles of the Napoleonic Wars including the battle of the Nile and Trafalgar. Her most famous achievement was though the trapping of Napoleon as he fled France after the Battle of Waterloo, the negotiations by her Captain for his surrender and his carriage to England. This is a fascinating tale of a ship's Captains and her crews during one of the greatest periods of British seapower.

Maria says

An interesting book written from the logs and writings of the Bellerophon and its captains, but nothing insightful or illuminating for someone who has read Patrick O'Brien or the Hornblower series. Of course, that is non-fiction versus fiction, so it was good to get validation for the fiction versions of the Battle of the Nile and Trafalgar that I had already read. Cordingly plumped for the death of Napoleon from stomach cancer as claimed by the doctor doing the autopsy in 1821. However, I believe the 1960's tests are more accurate than anything they could come up with in 1821, so I was surprised he did not even mention that Napoleon was probably murdered with arsenic, a little at a time. Not that it made much difference. The stomach cancer would have gotten him sooner rather than later. An interesting book but don't read it for any insights into Napoleon (although Cordingly does point out several differences between what actually happened and what Napoleon's memoirs claimed happened). Read it to get a feel for what it was like to be on a British man of war from beginning to end.
