

RODNEY

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Rodney by David Hannay

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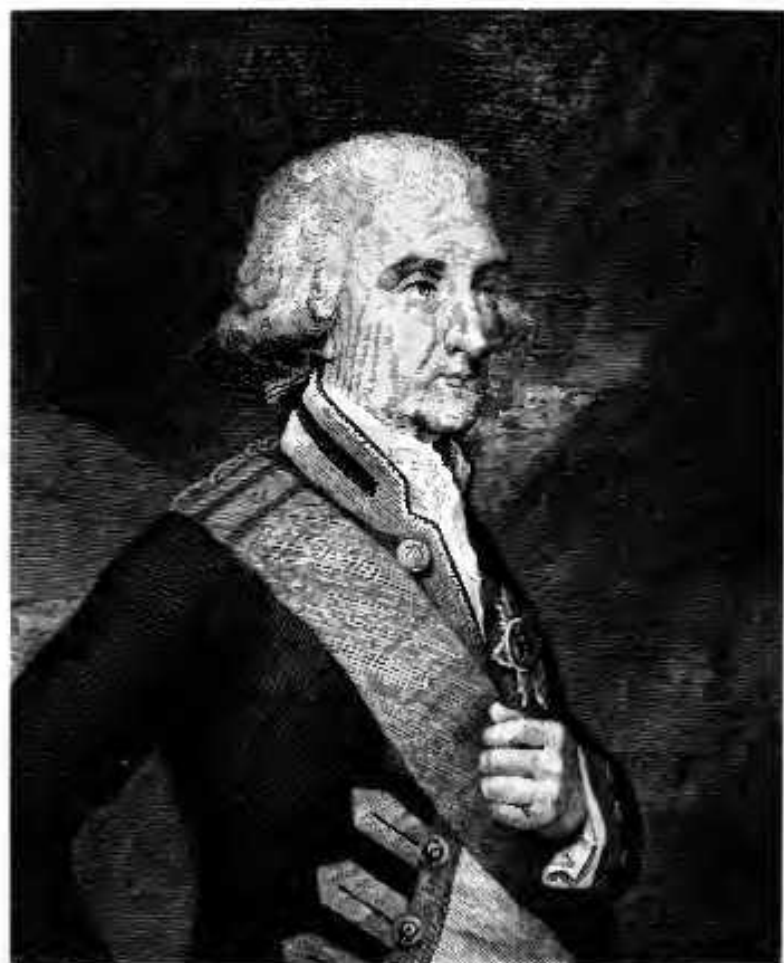
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DAVID HANNAY

RODNEY



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CHAPTER I

FAMILY AND EARLY CAREER

GEORGE BRYDGES RODNEY, the most famous of the great generation of English admirals who raised the navy to the level at which Nelson found it, was by descent a Somersetshire man. The family was one of considerable antiquity—of more antiquity indeed than fame. From the reign of Henry the Third until far into the seventeenth century they were established as owners of land in and about Stoke Rodney, at the foot of the Mendips, in the valley of the Axe between Draycott and Wells. The history of the house was summed up by Sir Edward Rodney, the last of them who held the family estate, in words which I do not presume to think I can better, and shall therefore quote.

Their faults whatsoever are not written in great letters, or become the subject of common fame, or the courts of justice; but as they lived without scandal, so they died without shame, going out of the world by the ordinary gate of sickness, and never by the hand of violence, some few excepted of ancient times, that died in the wars, and the late unfortunate gentleman, Sir George Rodney, who fell by his own sword; and although civil dissensions, in the Barons Wars, did

engage men in one side or the other, yet they for any I can find lived in a calm amidst these tempests, and were not entangled in the quarrels of the times. The reason of it may be that having a firm estate of their own, and able to subsist of themselves, they kept independent, living within their own orb, and mastering those affections of envy and ambition which commonly do but raise men for a greater fall. They had been always, from the time we first discover them, of the middle rank of subjects which is the most safe place—“*Circus mediis salvi sunt maxime,*” few or none of better estate, under the degree of Lords until the great flood of Church lands (whereof they possessed not one foot) improved many men's fortunes to a great height; nay, which is strange, from Sir Richard Rodeney, who was borne under Henry the Third, to Sir George Rodeney in 42 of Elizabeth, the space of above four hundred years, they stood like *Mare Mortuum* and neither ebbed nor flowed in their fortunes; they were so provident not to lessen; but neither by marriages, which is the ordinary step of augmentation, nor by any other means did they make any addition, insomuch that at this day I give the coat single which my ancestors gave without quartering any other.

Here, adorned with the brocaded elegance proper to the time of the writer, is a summing up of the history of a solid English country family. Stoke Rodeney lay out of the track of the great storms of English history, and its position helped the family to stand like *Mare Mortuum* for four hundred years. Still, a house which could live through all that happened in England between Henry the Third and Elizabeth without loss or gain, must have been of an equable temperament, free from great vices, follies, or qualities. The last stage was less peaceful, for Sir Edward Rodeney has to record money troubles and family disputes. He was himself a more stirring man than his ancestors had been. In his youth he fled abroad with Sir Edward Seymour, the husband