

**PUBLICATIONS OF THE NAVY
RECORDS SOCIETY, VOLUME
XXXI: RECOLLECTION OF
JAMES ANTHONY GARDNER**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649754724

Publications of the Navy Records Society, Volume XXXI: Recollection of James Anthony Gardner by James Anthony Gardner & Sir R. Vesey Hamilton & John Knox Laughton

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Cover @ 2017

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**JAMES ANTHONY GARDNER & SIR R.
VESEY HAMILTON & JOHN KNOX LAUGHTON**

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OF THE
NAVY RECORDS SOCIETY

VOL. XXXI.

RECOLLECTIONS
OF
JAMES ANTHONY GARDNER

RECOLLECTIONS
OF
James Anthony Gardner

COMMANDER R.N.

(1775-1814)

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PRINTED FOR THE NAVY RECORDS SOCIETY
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INTRODUCTION

IN many respects the present volume differs from the most of those which have been issued by the Society ; there is in it very little history, as commonly understood. The author, it is true, lived in a stirring time, and was himself an actor in some of the incidents which have shed a glory on our naval records ; but his account of these is meagre and of little importance. The interest which attaches to his ' Recollections ' is entirely personal and social ; we have in them sketches roughly drawn, crude, inartistic, and perhaps on that account the more valuable, of the life of the time ; of the men who were his companions in the berth, or the gun-room or the ward-room ; on deck, in sport or in earnest.

In all this, there is perhaps little that we did not know before in an otiose sort of way. We knew that the men of the time were often coarse in speech, rude in action ; but it may be that the reality, as portrayed by Commander Gardner, exceeds anything that we had imagined. It seems to carry us back to the days of Roderick Random, and to suggest that there had been but small improvement since Smollett wrote his celebrated description. A closer examination will correct this impression ; will convince us that there had, on the contrary, been a good deal of improvement ; that

the life was less hard, the manners less rude; and if the language does not show very much difference, it has to be considered that Smollett was writing for the public and Gardner was not; that Smollett's dialogues are more or less literary, and Gardner's are, for the most part, in the vernacular.

Occasionally, indeed, the language has been modified, or its undue strength merely indicated by a —; but where oaths and expletives formed such a large part of the conversational currency between intimates; when 'son of a bitch' was the usual equivalent of the modern 'chappie' or 'Johnnie' or 'rotter'; when 'damned' was everywhere recognised as a most ordinary intensitive, and 'damn your eyes' meant simply 'buck up,' it has been felt that entirely to bowdlerise the narrative would be to present our readers with a very imperfect picture of the life of the day.

Independent of the language, the most striking feature of the portraits is the universal drunkenness. It is mentioned as a thing too common to be considered a fault, though—if carried to excess—an amiable weakness, which no decent commanding officer would take serious notice of. Looking down the lists of old shipmates and messmates, the eye is necessarily caught by the frequency of such entries as 'too fond of grog,' 'did not dislike grog,' 'passionately fond of grog,' 'a drunken Hun,' a term of reprobation as a bully, rather than as a drunkard, 'fond of gin grog,' 'mad from drink,' 'insane from drink,' and so on, *passim*. For the officer of the watch to be drunk scarcely called for comment; it was only when, in addition to being drunk, he turned the captain out at midnight to save the ship, that he narrowly escaped being brought to a court martial; 'but we interceded for him, and the business was looked over' (p. 217).

It is, of course, familiarly known that during the later years of the eighteenth century, such drunkenness was almost more common on shore than afloat; and when more than half the peerage and the most distinguished statesmen were 'habitual drunkards,' there was, from the social point of view, some excuse for the many of Gardner's messmates. For good or ill, the navy has always been very conservative in its customs; and at a much later date, when hard drinking was going out of fashion on shore, except among very young men, it still continued prevalent in the navy. Some of our older officers will remember at least one instance in which a great public scandal was averted only in consideration of the social connections of the principal offender; and courts martial, bringing ruin and disgrace to the individual, long continued to be painfully frequent. Absolute reform in this direction was slow; but there are few things more remarkable than the change which has come over the service during the last quarter of a century.

But in the eighteenth century this hard drinking brought in its train not only the terribly frequent insanity, such as is recorded in so many of Gardner's pages; not only the gross lapses, some of which Gardner has indicated, but also numerous irregularities, which we may suspect where we do not know, and of which, quarrels and free fights in the ward-room or in the steerage—such, for instance, as brought on the series of Phaëton courts martial (pp. 73-4)—were only one type. Coarse practical joking among men no longer young was another characteristic of the life which seems subversive of true discipline. Here, of course, we are met by the great change which has everywhere taken place; and the horse-play of Billy Culmer and his friends—stupid vulgarity as it now appears—can scarcely