Shore Wives: The Lives Of British Naval Officers' Wives And Widows, 1750-1815

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SHORE WIVES: THE LIVES OF BRITISH NAVAL OFFICERS’
WIVES AND WIDOWS, 1750–1815

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By

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ABSTRACT


This thesis provides an analysis of the lives of mid- to late-eighteenth century Royal Navy officers’ wives and widows, including how they coped with the challenges of being separated from their husbands for extended periods of time. This separation forced them to accept additional financial and management responsibilities. By successfully managing these tasks, they proved that women were capable of managing money, purchasing property, rearing and educating children, working the patronage system, being political activists, dealing with bureaucracy, and networking. Shore wives performed these duties with the very real fear that their husbands might never come home alive. By taking up these burdens, the shore wives allowed their husbands to have successful careers and proved that women, seen by some as ‘the weaker sex,’ were more than capable.
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DEDICATION

For Frances, Henrietta, Fanny, Jane, Susan, Sarah, Lavinia, Louisa,
Anne, Elizabeth, Alice, and all of the other ‘shore wives,’ past and present.


**Introduction**

In August 1755, Frances Boscawen was in Portsmouth awaiting her husband’s return from North America when she received painful news. Edward, whom she had eagerly anticipated for six days, would be held back for another month because of a fever epidemic in his squadron. His devastated wife poured out her frustration in a letter: “I had so depended upon your coming day by day . . . that a month more seems an age, and to pass it here I cannot. . . . For here is the sea, and here are ships; and men of war come in daily, but not the ship which my eyes have ached in looking for every day.”

Fanny Boscawen shared her heartache with other naval officers’ spouses. Being separated from one’s husband or wife for a long period of time can be onerous in any circumstances, but in a situation where the spouse in question is in mortal danger the pressure and stress level increases monumentally. For Fanny Boscawen and other women, the task of being late eighteenth-century “shore wives” was difficult and challenging, but not without opportunity. These ordinary women, from middling or gentry classes, could find themselves ennobled, celebrated at court, publicly celebrated or humiliated, or tragically widowed. Required to patriotically and stoically see their husbands off to war, they were left with the responsibility of not only running their homes, but also managing finances, often through agents and other intermediaries, actively participating in naval patronage networks, and using power of attorney to make

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1 Cecil Aspinall-Oglander, *Admiral’s Wife: Being the life and letters of The Hon. Mrs. Edward Boscawen from 1719 to 1761* (London: Longmans, 1940) 192, emphasis original.
capital investments, all while maintaining a very active correspondence with their absent husbands, which required an extensive knowledge of winds and geography in order to ensure that their letters arrived. One instruction from Napoleonic Admiral Horatio Nelson to his wife Fanny directed that “If the wind is to the westward direct for me at Sheerness, if not gone by Sunday can’t go for 10 days.”  

Despite hardships, most shore wives managed these duties successfully while their husbands were away. Some, such as the shrewdly practical Henrietta Rodney, saw their husband’s new commands for what they were, an opportunity for increased income and promotion. Others, such as Fanny Boscawen, became emotionally distressed at each new parting. Unfortunately, some shore wives were victimized by their separation. Fanny Nelson’s husband took advantage of the distance between Bath and Naples to begin an affair with Lady Emma Hamilton.

These women lived during one of the British navy’s most active periods. The late eighteenth century featured sustained periods of warfare, including the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), the American Revolution (1776–1783), the French Revolutionary Wars (1793–1802), and the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815). Warfare, while dangerous and stressful for naval officers, offered the chance for promotion and prosperity. No one took more advantage of naval victories than Nelson, but there is no doubt that the navy’s triumphs over the French and Spanish navies were vital to creating the British Empire. The wars of the eighteenth century also established Britain’s reputation as the world’s premiere naval power.

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Many prominent historians have written about the lives of officers who commanded ships in the Royal Navy. Biographies of Admiral Lord Hood, Admiral George Rodney, Nelson, and other noted officers abound. However, an account of the experiences of these officers’ wives is missing. This thesis takes up the challenge issued by Professor Nicholas Rodger in his 1999 historiographical essay on recent eighteenth-century naval studies, and examines “the still unexplored experience of the mothers, sweethearts, and wives who made up the female half of the naval community.”

Rodger estimated the number of married officers by analyzing the next of kin for the “1407 officers and men of a sample of ships who died during the war [the Seven Years’ War]. . . . 355, or one-quarter left widows. An earlier analysis of the same type pointed to less than one-fifth being married.” However, the officers were married more often than ordinary seamen.

The lives of the shore wives are an untapped, yet valuable resource. They comprise a subset of two areas of study—women’s history and naval history—but have not been analyzed by historians in either discipline. Some research, by Joan Druett in *Hen Frigates* and Suzanne Stark in *Female Tars,* explores merchant captains’ wives or other women, mostly wives of warrant officers, who worked on naval ships, as well as the very few who disguised themselves as men in order to serve. However, the vast majority of naval wives, unlike Jane Austen’s Mrs. Croft from *Persuasion,* who was able to sail with her admiral husband on his various commands, remained on shore in Britain, separated from their husbands.

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Evidence found in personal letters from both sides shows that the absent husbands put a great amount of trust in and therefore pressure on these women. The research shows that these women did not think of themselves as supporting women’s rights, or that they did not need their husbands’ guidance. Frances Boscawen outlined her beliefs on the place of women to her friend Mrs. Delany after hearing of the birth of Mrs. Delany’s niece, explaining that it was alright to spoil a girl, because “being born to obey, [a girl] will be reduced to submission sooner or later.” The shore wives were only doing what was expected and required of them by their husbands, the admiralty, and society. However, in taking on these responsibilities, they proved that women were capable of managing money, purchasing property, rearing and educating children, working the patronage system, being political activists, dealing with bureaucracy, and networking. To a modern perspective, this amount of independence and responsibility seems like it would have been welcome. However, their letters suggest that to many of these naval wives, this responsibility was instead a burden. The majority of the shore wives were quite successful, financially and politically. What sets these women apart from widows, who also had control over their own property and finances, albeit with the growing societal fears about powerful women, is that they took on these responsibilities because their husbands were hundreds or thousands of miles away fighting a war.

While the details of several wives will be used to illustrate the complexity of these women’s experiences, this thesis focuses on the wives of three prominent admirals. These women’s husbands served during mostly different periods in the mid-to-late eighteenth century and had both similar and different experiences. Primary documents for each of

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these three survive in abundance, and allow for more complete research and analysis. Edward Boscawen served primarily during the Seven Years’ War, George Brydges Rodney was able to rehabilitate his reputation—damaged by financial troubles and alleged dishonesty regarding patronage—by his service in the American Revolution, and Horatio Nelson became the iconic hero of the wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. Correspondence between Frances Boscawen and her husband Edward illuminates their relationship in the 1740s and 1750s, including her many duties and contributions to the marriage. Henrietta Rodney, Admiral Rodney’s second wife, shared in her husband’s financial problems as well as his naval successes. Horatio Nelson’s relationship with his wife Fanny includes the often-told (but incorrect) story of the romantic admiral’s being pushed into the arms of another by Fanny’s coldness. Her story has been related by his numerous biographers. This thesis takes a fresh look at Fanny Nelson’s life in another context; not compared to Emma Hamilton or a theoretical ideal of a supportive wife, but as one naval officer’s wife among many of this period.

The research will show that despite the growing tide of “separate spheres” ideology toward the end of the eighteenth century, the roles and responsibilities of the shore wives of this period did not change. The shore wives were another, more diverse group beyond Amanda Vickery’s Lancashire wives, who proved the impracticality of “separate spheres.” Vickery uses her subjects’ definition of public activities, but those seem to only include “the play, the opera, Richmond assembly . . . all venues which could

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be penetrated for the price of a ticket and where visitors could see and be seen.” The shore wives’ public activities went far beyond a visit to the opera. Their public role often required them to make decisions in areas such as real estate, commerce, patronage, and the government via their relations with the Admiralty. Roger Morriss, in his biography of the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century Admiral George Cockburn, mentions Cockburn’s wife, Sarah, only twice. He also points out that “Cockburn separated the public from the private.” In fairness to Morriss, he does explain that almost all of Cockburn’s personal correspondence did not survive. However, it seems impossible that Sarah would have been totally separated from the public sphere. All of the other shore wives examined in this thesis were forced into that sphere by their husbands’ absences. They do not seem to have suffered any redress. On the contrary, they are celebrated in poems as loyal, devoted partners. In Persuasion, Jane Austen writes openly of naval wives joining their husband’s “profession.”

This thesis will analyze how these women prepared for, reacted to, and coped with these additional responsibilities, as well as how they were affected by the lengthy separations from their husbands. In the process, the picture of a previously unexplored group of women becomes clear and their place in eighteenth-century women’s history and their lasting legacy can be explored.

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Chapter 1

Marriage and Children

Royal Naval Officers’ wives in the second half of the eighteenth century were mostly from the gentry or middling classes, but a few came from aristocratic families. This classification parallels the backgrounds of their naval officer husbands. Fanny Boscawen’s father, William Evelyn, served as a Member of Parliament and High Sheriff of Kent and her mother, Frances Glanville, was an heiress who died while giving birth to her daughter. Brought up by her father, Fanny seemed to have a low opinion of her stepmother, according to the tone of her letters. Fanny was also distantly related to Edward Boscawen, through his sister who had married into the family of Fanny’s great-great uncle, the diarist John Evelyn. Fanny’s father sometimes left her in the care of an aunt while he and her stepmother traveled. Fanny met her future husband when Edward visited his sister in Kent while on leave.

Henrietta Rodney came from a much less prominent family, but used her family connections to improve her situation and marry a Vice Admiral. Born Henrietta Clies, she may have met George Rodney when her family was employed by the family of his first wife, Jane Compton. Henrietta was later part of Jane Rodney’s household, and Henrietta’s mother cared for Rodney’s children after Jane’s death. The patronage of the Compton family allowed Henrietta Clies to be in a position to marry the then vice-

10 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 3.
11 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 3-4.
12 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 5-6, 11.
admiral, baronet, and Member of Parliament, George Rodney, who was twenty years her senior.\textsuperscript{13}

Frances Nelson was born on the island of Nevis in the West Indies. Her father, William Woolward, Chief Justice on the island, managed the family’s sugar plantations. Her uncle, John Herbert, served as the President of Nevis.\textsuperscript{14} Fanny grew up in a prosperous, if somewhat isolated world. By the end of the eighteenth century, enslaved Africans outnumbered whites on the island by ten to one.\textsuperscript{15} She lost her mother at a very young age, and although she was close to her father, “Fanny’s upbringing would have depended initially upon servants and later the influence of her many relations.”\textsuperscript{16} Her father died from infection before Fanny turned 18. His illness, however, provided some consolation as the young doctor attending Mr. Woolward was Josiah Nisbet, a second son of a plantation owner who became Fanny’s first husband.\textsuperscript{17} The couple went to England in 1780 so that Josiah could set up a practice in Salisbury. Fanny gave birth to a son, Josiah, there. However, Dr. Nisbet soon fell ill, and he died less than two years after the marriage. Fanny returned to her uncle’s home in Nevis, where she served as hostess for the president.\textsuperscript{18} It was in this capacity that she met Captain Nelson.

Each bride’s circumstances, despite having different backgrounds (a distant cousin, a much needed second wife, a young widow with a child) were not extraordinary for the period. What were different are those occasions in which a common sailor, for

\textsuperscript{14} Shelia Hardy, Frances, Lady Nelson: The Life and Times of an Admirable Wife (Staplehurst, Kent: Spellmount, 2005) 24-25.
\textsuperscript{15} Hardy, 24.
\textsuperscript{16} Hardy, 25.
\textsuperscript{17} Hardy, 30.
\textsuperscript{18} Hardy, 31-34.
example Thomas Hardy created a Baronet after the Battle of Trafalgar, married into an aristocratic family. This illustrates the level of upward social mobility a successful career in the navy could bring, for men and for their wives.

The average age at the time of first marriage in the mid-eighteenth century was 26.4 for men and 23.4 for women. Naval officers tended to be older, for several reasons. Most officers waited until they had achieved the rank of post captain before marriage. This gave them some sense of financial security, as well as rank, status, opportunity for a large share of prize money from captured ships, and promotion. Another reason for the delay in marriage was the length of time officers spent at sea. Nelson met Fanny while serving in the West Indies. Boscawen, as stated earlier, only met his wife during a visit to his sister. Henrietta Rodney was already connected to the Admiral’s household. Young officers did not have the time to attend many society functions. Finding a wife was often brought about by family connections or chance meetings. During wartime British navy ships were stationed all around the world. Men hoping for promotion did not spend much time onshore because success in battle provided the quickest way to money and promotion. In addition, officers without a ship could collect only half-pay. Most tried to avoid this financial loss.

Successful, well-connected, or lucky young men could achieve post rank at a young age. Edward Boscawen became post captain at age twenty-six as did George

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20 The true rank of captain given to a person who commands a rated ship, instead of a person, such as a master and commander, who is given the courtesy title of “captain.”

Rodney. Horatio Nelson, who was lucky enough to be serving in the West Indies when the death of a captain caused an opening, was appointed post captain at the age of twenty. However, achieving the rank of post captain at a young age did not necessarily mean that those men would marry early. Boscawen did not marry until age 31. By the time he and the 23-year-old Frances married in 1742, Edward Boscawen was a Member of Parliament, taking an old family seat in Truro, and captain of the 60-gun ship *Dreadnought*. Rodney married his first wife, Jane Compton, at age 36.

Some couples had an even wider age difference. Cuthbert Collingwood was nearly forty-three when he married young Sarah Blackett, and nearly twenty years separated Thomas Masterman Hardy and his nineteen-year-old bride, Louisa Berkeley. However, some couples were also close in age. Nelson was twenty-nine when he married the widowed Frances Nisbet, who was twenty-six. Edward Pellew was only one year older than his wife, Susan. The variant ages directly corresponds with time onshore and shows how unstable life could be for naval officers. A career could take an officer far from home for lengthy periods of time which increased his age at the time of marriage, or

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28 Knight, 569.
a period of peace might allow an officer to court and wed a woman at a more common age for the period.

Burdened with huge responsibilities of their own while at sea or in port, Royal Navy officers depended heavily on their wives to carry out such diverse tasks as knowing when to mow hay and determining with which admiral’s wife they should form an alliance. These duties extended for the shore wives the responsibilities of a typical middling class or elite marriage, in which women and men mostly accepted gender specific roles, and expected spouses not to cross the boundaries. A wife accepted her husband’s control over family finances, but expected him to leave the running of the household to her. “Successful marriages depended upon mutually agreed duties shared between husbands and wives. Women, as mistresses of households, were responsible for the household’s orderly and successful management, while their husbands had a duty to provide and care for the family. Both roles involved public, as well as private, functions and both were deemed to be crucial.”  

However, the shore wives did not have the option to share gender-differentiated duties with their husbands when they were serving overseas. During that time, the shore wives were often expected to handle public and private affairs while dealing with the very real possibility that their husbands might not return.

While for most women in the mid- to late-eighteenth century marriage meant almost constant pregnancies and having to care for many children, shore wives were often spared this burden.  

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30 Barker and Chalus, 63.
31 Barker and Chalus, 70.
numbered between six and seven. However, this was not the case for many naval officers’ wives. Especially during wartime, officers’ wives were saved from constant pregnancies as distance proved a very successful form of birth control. The distance also served to constrain the sexual behavior of officers’ wives, because it would be difficult to pass off a child as being one’s husband’s if he had been stationed in the West Indies for the past year. Fanny Boscawen joked to her husband on the subject after revealing to him that she believed she was with child: “‘twould have been a very agreeable surprise to you to have found a little Willy-boy sucking at the breast, with blue eyes and a fair face – in short such as you would have no scruple to own.”

The number of children and the difference in their ages in naval officers’ families were directly linked to the husband’s time onshore. Sarah Collingwood gave birth to her two daughters in rapid succession soon after her marriage to the admiral in 1791. The first girl, also called Sarah, was born in September 1792 and the second, Mary Patience, in August 1793. There would be no more children for the couple, as Collingwood’s naval career caused him to be nearly always at sea. The admiral would spend less than a total of two years from 1792 to 1810 at his home in Morpeth. Louisa Hardy had a similar experience, with a break of four years between her second and third child, while Sir Thomas was patrolling the Portuguese coast. Frances Boscawen’s six pregnancies may seem prolific, but her daughter Elizabeth would survive fourteen confinements as a consequence of her and her husband, Henry, Duke of Beaufort, being “scarcely ever

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32 Barker and Chalus, 70.
33 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 59.
35 Gore, 43-45.
apart.” However, having a husband at home was no guarantee of motherhood. Frances and Horatio Nelson spent the first five years of their marriage onshore together while he was on half-pay, yet had no children.

Women from elite or middling families were expected to spend their adult lives running a home. The level of education that these girls and young women received varied. Some were taught advanced mathematics and classical languages, but education for girls generally focused on home management. Education for elite or middling girls was sometimes impractical. “Accomplishments [such as singing or playing music, playing cards, or needlework] became entrenched in the curriculum as a response to this goal [for a woman to become a well-behaved mistress of a house] overshadowing ‘useful’ housewifery skills.”

The education level of Fanny Boscawen, Henrietta Rodney, and Fanny Nelson is not clear. However, their letters provide some clues. Fanny Boscawen’s earliest surviving letter, written when she was seventeen, already demonstrates the dramatic, yet poetic styling of her later letters to her often absent husband. For example, she includes phrases such as “And this deponent sayeth further . . .” Her letters also show that she has learned some French, as she writes, “You are impatient, my dearest cousine, to know de quoi il s’agit.” The erudition of these letters demonstrates that Fanny Boscawen was emotional yet thoughtful, loving, and devoted to her family, as well as having many close

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37 Knight, 569-570.
38 Barker and Chalus, 41.
39 Barker and Chalus, 39.
40 Barker and Chalus, 45.
friendships. It is easy to foresee her as the patron of the bluestocking assemblies she would become after her husband’s death.

Henrietta Rodney’s letters to her husband during the 1780s reflect a lack of formal training. Her style was to write in one continuous sentence, with the occasional dash to separate thoughts. This gives her letters a hectoring, somewhat demanding tone and a lack of sophistication. The lack of sophistication was probably because of her rapid rise up the social ladder, which may also explain her ignorance of court etiquette. After the Admiral captured the French Admiral de Grasse, she wrote to her husband, “I sent to Lord Aylesbury . . . to make my excuses for not paying my duty to their Majesties on the distinction they had conferred on you, . . . as I did not understand the etiquette necessary on such an occasion.” Henny’s lack of sophistication and social knowledge reflects her lower social status before marrying Lord Rodney. However, she circulated in London society despite this handicap, although she was not known as a great hostess. The dearth of gatherings at the Rodney household probably had more to do with their financial situation, but it is hard to imagine Henny being comfortable as a society hostess.

Henrietta’s letters reflect that Rodney’s creditors and others with whom the family was financially connected sometimes treated her rudely. She may not have been treated this way if she were from a more prominent family. In November 1780, Henrietta vented her frustrations to Rodney concerning a letter she received when she inquired about some of the Rodney family belongings that may have been left at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Marr. “His letter is really insolent,” she began, and related that Marr started

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42 PRO 30/20/21/1
43 Major-General Mundy, The Life and Correspondence of the late Admiral Lord Rodney Volume II, (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1830) 316.
“morrelising [sic] on the Imutability [sic] of Human affairs giving me a long string of advice & I feel myself rather too old & too proud to be Lectured by so insignificant a being.” While misspellings and the lack of punctuation were common in Henrietta’s letters, they seem especially prominent in her discourse on Marr. This could reflect her anger at Marr, but also demonstrates that she sometimes allowed her emotions to affect her writing style, unlike Frances Boscawen.

Fanny Nelson’s biographer Shelia Hardy believes it is likely that Fanny had a governess and may have even spent a few years in England at a school for young ladies. Fanny’s letters written during her estrangement from Nelson show a high level of literacy. She utilized complicated grammar conventions and phrasing and had a highly developed vocabulary, using and spelling words, such as recompense, dejected, miserable, and generosity, correctly. Her writings illustrate Fanny’s intelligence, sophistication, and social skill, three of the characteristics that Nelson’s biographers often find lacking.

Regardless of the level of education, the duties of a navy wife would be new to those wives not from a naval family. Pellew wrote of his wife Susan, “I roused my Wife out of a snug Corner in a little retired Village before she ever heard a Gun or seen the Sea.” Everything from understanding the workings of the admiralty and the naval patronage system to figuring out how and where to order supplies for a captain heading out to sea would be required of Susan and other shore wives. Mastering this specialized

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44 PRO 30/20/21/1
45 Hardy, 26.
46 DAV 2/1 – 2/27 [Frances Nelson’s letters to agent Alexander Davison at the Caird Library, National Maritime Museum]
47 Parkinson, 62.
education, as well as dealing with the shift of responsibilities that occurred when their husband were at home or away, would be a continual challenge for the shore wives.
Chapter 2

Life Onshore

It would be tempting to speculate that the relationship between a naval officer and his wife while he was onshore was tranquil and happy. However, evidence suggests that these periods could also be stressful. Further research, perhaps using correspondence from an officer and his shore wife to other people, should help to illustrate their feelings. Many of Edward Pellew’s letters that discuss his relationship with Susan, used by C. Northcote Parkinson in his biography, are addressed to the admiral’s friends.

“Recent historical work [on the lives of women within marriage in the eighteenth century] has cast aside the preoccupation with continuity and change, and suggested instead that marriage was not transformed from a patriarchal to a companionate model during this period, but remained a combination of both.” In theory, the relationship between a shore wife and her husband while he was at home would revert back to that of a traditional eighteenth-century marriage, no matter how much control the wife exerted on their affairs when he was away. However, that situation had to be problematic. While some wives may have gladly relinquished the reins, it can hardly be true that all of them, especially those who were arguably more successful managers than their husbands, would not have done so without some measure of annoyance or regret.

Naval officers onshore were out of their element. Trained to command ships, being landlocked did not always suit them. Despite professing their extreme sadness at

48 Barker and Chalus, 63.
leaving their wives, captains seemed to be genuinely excited at the prospect of a command. Their exuberations cannot be for only financial reasons. Many tried to find naval work while onshore. Edward Boscawen was fortunate enough to be appointed a Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty between his service in India and the beginning of the Seven Years’ War in 1755.\textsuperscript{49} George Rodney also found peacetime naval employment. Others were not so lucky.

Many tried to find alternative careers until they found a new command. Becoming a Member of Parliament became a popular onshore occupation. However, this was not an inexpensive enterprise. Susan Pellew may have regretted her husband’s presence when, despite her counsel, he decided to stand for Parliament in 1802. Litigation against Pellew for voter fraud brought against him by an unsuccessful candidate named Wilson cost Pellew £2000.\textsuperscript{50} He used his prize money to cover this expense, and took the first opportunity to return to active command in the spring of 1803. Parkinson speculates that one of the main reasons Pellew did not move to London after being elected was because of Susan’s hatred of the city. Pellew wrote of the tensions at home, saying to his friend Alexander Broughton, “Susan is still obstinately bent upon resistance to my wishes and I assure you has made me miserable . . . It is terrible with two Nice Girls at Home to hear Domestic contention, and therefore My dear Alex I am going abroad, I hope with a Command.”\textsuperscript{51} Pellew may have won the election, but Susan won the argument. The family did not move to London. This episode demonstrates that married women did not always obey their husbands. Susan Pellew seems to have coped better than others, such as

\textsuperscript{49} Aspinall-Oglander, \textit{Admiral’s Wife}, 146.  
\textsuperscript{50} Parkinson, 286.  
\textsuperscript{51} Parkinson, 286.
Sarah Collingwood who amassed great amounts of debt, with managing affairs in her husband’s absence. She was clearly a strong woman and Pellew, unlike Boscawen, did not feel the need to give her much advice. Susan may well have been a shore wife who managed affairs onshore better than her husband could. Letters from Susan to her friends, if they exist, would be very valuable if she wrote as much about her marriage as did her husband.

George Rodney was spectacularly unsuccessful at managing a career onshore. David Syrett sums up the period for Rodney between the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution as a “staggering display of ill judgment,” in which the Admiral would “come close to destroying his career as a navy officer, alienate his friends and patrons, and be forced to flee England in order to escape his creditors after dissipating his fortune through high living, electioneering, and gambling.” ⁵² Nelson spent his time onshore from 1787 to 1792 attempting to farm the land at Burnham Thorpe and worrying about his and Fanny’s financial situation. ⁵³ They may have considered living abroad, but settled for the economy, despite the harsh weather, of his father’s home in Norfolk. ⁵⁴

Living on half-pay, for officers unlike Edward Pellew who had a large reserve of prize money, could be difficult. All warrant and commissioned officers without a placement received half-pay. Nelson’s half-pay in 1788 was £100 a year, less his agents’ fees. This made them rather poor by gentry standards. He and Fanny each received an additional £100 a year from family members, but by 1791 Nelson’s agents informed him

⁵³Knight, 118-123.
⁵⁴Hardy 69-71.
that he had less than £2 in ready cash.\textsuperscript{55} Nelson and Fanny pressed the Nisbet family for the promised £500 for Josiah, but to no avail. They could not afford to set up Josiah in the career Fanny preferred, the law, but Nelson only agreed to take him into the navy once the war with Revolutionary France had begun.\textsuperscript{56} War meant opportunity for midshipmen as well as captains. Losing both her husband and son must only have doubled Fanny’s anxiety.

In addition to his half-pay, Vice-Admiral Rodney chose to accept the governorship of Greenwich Hospital in 1765.\textsuperscript{57} However, the compensation was low and Rodney added to his family’s financial distress by gambling, and losing, heavily. By 1771, he had to take a loan of £6,000.\textsuperscript{58} There is no record of Henrietta’s reaction to their financial situation or whether she completely understood the cause of their poverty. The ultra-flattering biography by Rodney’s son-in-law Major-General Mundy claims that the admiral was a noble and heroic man victimized more by a lack of support from his friends than from his own vices.\textsuperscript{59} Henrietta’s letters show that she was consistently supportive of her husband, but felt the strain caused by their lack of funds.\textsuperscript{60} Letters from Rodney’s agents and friends during his exile in France in 1775 often tell of household economies that Lady Rodney had to face. When Rodney expressed his desire to return to London, a friend wrote, “I wish at times you was over here to be on the spot to push your friends. . . [But] to bring them [his family] here to expenses would be bad also, unless

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Knight, 120.
\item Hardy, 82.
\item Syrett, \textit{Rodney Papers, Volume II}, 4-6.
\item Syrett, \textit{Rodney Papers, Volume II}, 5, 8.
\item Major-General Mundy, \textit{The Life and Correspondence of the late Admiral Lord Rodney Volume I}, (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1830) 168.
\item PRO 30/20/21/1
\end{thebibliography}
Lady Rodney could submit to be the recluse and not go beyond a boiled chicken or mutton or both.\(^{61}\) This sentiment seems uncharacteristic of Henrietta Rodney. Her background made her more, not less, able to manage their reduced situation. It is much more probable that Lord Rodney would have felt the pains of poverty more than Henny.

One remedy for financial distress was full employment. Both Rodney and Nelson chased any opportunity for a command. When the American Revolution began, Rodney and his family were in Paris. Unable to return to press his case for employment to Lord Sandwich, then First Lord of the Admiralty, in person, Rodney relied on his son and Henrietta, to whom he granted a power of attorney. While George Rodney appealed his father’s case to Lord Sandwich directly, Lady Rodney took the route acceptable to wives: establishing connections with powerful families and looking for opportunities to put forward Rodney’s name in society. In this vein, she cultivated the patronage of Admiral Byron for one of her sons, kept her husband informed of the activity at court and the gossip about the war, and provided the admiral with sound advice.\(^{62}\) Rodney’s letters express how much he relied on her. “I hope you approve of my letter to Lord George Germaine,” he wrote and asked her, “if it is thought proper I should write to Lord North, let me know.”\(^{63}\) It was only when a French acquaintance promised to pay the admiral’s debts that Rodney was allowed to return to England. He eventually took command of a squadron in the West Indies.\(^{64}\)

Throughout this re-employment period, Henrietta seems to have been remarkably practical. She seems to have coped quite well, despite the warning about settling for

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\(^{61}\) Syrett, Rodney Papers, Volume II, 206.  
\(^{62}\) Mundy, Volume the First, 168-181.  
\(^{63}\) Mundy, Volume the First, 171, 169.  
\(^{64}\) Syrett, Rodney Papers, Volume II, 16.
boiled chicken, with their financial difficulties. There is no evidence to suggest that she was not anxious to help her husband gain a command, even though she had to realize that by doing so she was putting him in harm’s way. Henny knew that full employment was the only way to end their financial distress, despite Rodney’s being in danger.

Nelson took matters into his own hands in early 1792, when war with France was once again threatening. Fanny was left behind in Burnham Thorpe. Her relative isolation hampered her ability to assist her husband in finding a command. It was only after Nelson had gone to sea that she would begin networking in Portsmouth and Bath, cultivating strong friendships among other naval officers and their wives. This finally gave Fanny an opportunity to learn more about the duties of a shore wife. Her greatest connection turned out to be Lady Lavinia Spencer, wife of Lord John George Spencer, First Lord of the Admiralty from 1794–1801. Once again, accusations of Fanny Nelson’s lack of intelligence are to be doubted. Befriending the wife of the future First Lord was a very smart move. It is also difficult to believe that Lady Spencer, the sister-in-law of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, would have become a confidant of a person with a lackluster personality, especially when Nelson was just one of many captains in 1793. His great victories, and subsequent promotions, were yet to come.

Once a command was found, the shore wives had to prepare themselves for being home alone. One set of stresses traded for another. Instead of dealing with possibly sulky husbands and forced economies, they would contend with separation and fear. For those, such as Frances Boscawen who had experience being apart from her Edward, the situation, while emotional, was at least familiar. For Frances Nelson, who said good-bye

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65 Hardy, 77, 96.
to her husband and her eleven-year-old son, it was uncharted territory. Certainly Fanny had already separated from Josiah, as most mothers of sons had, when he was sent away to school soon after Nelson and his wife returned to England in 1787. However, the shore wives would experience a heightened level of stress and anxiety. While mothers feared that their sons might feel the wrath of a particularly strict master, this was nothing compared to the worry for Frances Boscawen, Henrietta Rodney, Susan Pellew, and Fanny Nelson, who all sent sons into the Royal Navy during times of war. Shore wives also understood that they could, in one violent moment, become widows. This imminent fear was not typically endured by other women. A parliamentary wife may have felt that politics was a dangerous business, but no one fired broadsides at politicians.

The conflict between supporting their husbands’ careers and wanting to be with them was always present for the shore wives. Frances Boscawen and Fanny Nelson expressed more emotion at the thought of separation from their husbands, Mrs. Boscawen once declaring that “I wish to God you was at home, for I don’t believe you are doing yourself any good abroad, and I want you more than Mr. Anson [Admiral George Anson] does,” but all shore wives had to acknowledge the importance of their husbands being fully employed at sea.66

Coming to terms with this combination of separation and fear was a challenge for the shore wives. It shows their sense of duty and their character that the group, despite Frances Boscawen’s whining, accepted their lot. The shore wife must have realized the importance of her husband’s profession, how important it was to him, or how much of an opportunity a command during wartime could be. The shore wives accepted this rather

66 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 41.
stoically, for even Fanny Boscawen’s hysterics were short lived. Once the initial pain of separation had ended, she took up her additional duties with zeal. The alternative was to be seen as something between weak and unpatriotic. They could show their love and devotion to their husbands by remaining in control. They could be most helpful by being active “professional” partners.
Chapter 3
At Sea

Military husbands at war brought financial security for their families, but it came at a price. The shore wives and their husbands paid in many ways. Both hoped for the opportunity for victory and promotion, even though to gain these, naval officers were in action and in danger. Separation led to anxiety and stress for both parties. Not only were shore wives concerned about their husbands’ safety, their own lives would be disrupted. Some wives moved house to be at hand when their husbands were able to return to shore. Portsmouth was especially popular. Others, such as Fanny Nelson and Jane Austen’s sister-in-law, sought the company of other shore wives in London or Bath. For those who had young children, such as Henrietta Rodney and Fanny Boscawen, traveling to a port town proved more difficult and expensive. However, the possibility of seeing a loved one was a powerful draw.

Separations, and preparing for separations, were the first worry for shore wives whose husbands were heading to sea. Both the officers and their wives had much to do in preparation for his taking up a command. Arrangements were made with agents for bills to be paid and for money to be sent to the wives. A letter from Boscawen to Fanny in 1755, while the Admiral was in Portsmouth preparing to leave for the West Indies, details some of these wranglings. “Enclosed I send you a Letter of Attorney,” he explains, “by which you will receive my salary when due. Mr. Doody will give you the money for the coals and candles and send Mr. Poumies . . . to the Navy Office for the contingent bill for
the thousand pounds which I have signed.” Frances Boscawen showed that she actively participated in the preparations by assisting the Admiral in finding a personal cook for his ship. She wrote in April 1755 of her exhaustive efforts to secure someone for her husband. Fanny negotiated not only pay with the Admiral’s future employee, but also traveling expenses. She explained a notation in a letter that the cook, Augustin Faesch, sent to Boscawen, writing “That same ‘pr: take’ is, I fancy, a claim which he lays in to a share of prize money.”

This exchange between the Boscawens illustrates the importance of partnership in naval marriages. Both parties understood the danger inherently involved in the Admiral going off to war, but dealt with practical issues. Boscawen trusted his wife and made an effort to assure her financial security, and ensured she knew whom to contact, for what purposes, and when. For her part, Fanny proved how an experienced shore wife understood what her husband would need while at sea and how to help him secure those needs. She knew enough to include the cook’s ship pay in the salary negotiations. It is also worth mentioning that while Boscawen was in Portsmouth preparing for his mission, he could not tell his wife where he was to be sent, nor when he would leave. His orders were to be kept secret. Fanny had no idea whether he was going to India or the Indies. Nevertheless, she performed her duties.

This was not, of course, the first time that Mrs. Boscawen had said good-bye to her husband. She had seen him off twice before, so she had experience with the steps required to prepare her husband for service at sea, even though she was not from a naval

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69 Aspinall-Oglander, *Admiral’s Wife*, 166.
family. Even so, not all pre-sail purchases went according to plan. Boscawen informed her in May 1755 that “the best sort of table-cloths that you bought of Mr. Faux are good, but the others too small and very coarse.”

No one was perfect, but this situation, when examined next to one of Fanny Nelson’s famous failings, shows Mrs. Nelson in a more positive light.

It must be remembered that Fanny Nelson had no experience of naval matters before marrying the captain. Her first husband was a doctor, her father a lawyer, and her uncle a plantation owner and governor. The first time that Fanny had to help Nelson fit out for sea was in 1793, five years after their wedding. As noted before, they did not associate with many other naval families during this time. Therefore Fanny had no opportunity to gain the practical knowledge needed to know the proper way for food to be packed and the best way to send Nelson’s personal items to his ship.

Nelson’s letters to Fanny while preparing the Agamemnon complained about several errors on her part. “You forgot to send my things from Mr. Thomas’s by the Sheerness boat,” his letter of April 9, 1793 began. “I have got a keg of tongues which I suppose you ordered, and also a trunk from Wells, Norfolk and a hamper of 3 hams, a breast of bacon, and a face, not very well packed, there being no straw between them and the motion of the wagon has rubbed them very much. However they will do,” he begrudgingly concluded.

This letter began rather abruptly; most of Nelson’s letters lacked an elaborate preamble. Historians and others looking for early discontent in the Nelson marriage perceive this incident as proving Fanny’s incompetence. Yet even Roger Knight concedes that Nelson’s departure was “hectic” and that therefore these types of

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70 Lloyd, 183.
71 Naish, 76.
mistakes could happen.\textsuperscript{72} The rest of Knight’s chapter, “The Commissioning of the 
\textit{Agamemnon},” clearly shows that Nelson himself made most of his own purchases and 
arrangements for his personal property.\textsuperscript{73} Nelson may have done so because he wanted to 
handle all of the arrangements himself, knowing his own preferences, and possibly 
excited to be so engaged after years of relative inactivity. He may not have trusted Fanny 
to complete the preparations to his satisfaction. Whatever the reason, he missed an 
opportunity to teach Fanny the necessary skills, so surely Fanny, on her first try, should 
be forgiven for a mistake in the process.

While not all couples, especially of the professional, middling, or elite classes, 
spent all their time together, the length of time naval officer couples spent apart might 
have affected their relationships. Husbands might have lived in London while serving in 
Parliament, leaving wives at home to deal with family and financial issues, but these 
separations were short-lived. In \textit{The Gentleman’s Daughter}, Amanda Vickery describes 
several marriages of this class in the eighteenth century. In her small sampling of 
Lancashire families, Vickery describes familial separations that left both partners bereft. 
Describing the relationship between two of her main subjects, William and Anne Gossip, 
Vickery explains that “William Gossip never left his wife’s side without complaint. Even 
after fifteen years of marriage, he lamented a separation: ‘heartily tired of being so long 
absent from my dearest life. I am now entered upon the fifth week of my exile – this will

\textsuperscript{72} Knight, 147.
\textsuperscript{73} Commissioned officers brought their own food, drink, linens, silver, etc. on board ship. Captains and 
admirals often entertained brother officers or lower ranking commissioned officers on their ship. It was 
important to lay in the proper amount of stores for this purpose as well as for personal consumption.
be the longest separation we ever yet have had.’” 74 While some wives in Vickery’s analysis handled separation stoically, Barbara Stanhope described her separation anxiety in dramatic fashion. “My hart [sic] is so full I cannot right half I wood for shedding tears . . . I am going to Horsforth today: but not to finde you thear, is intolerable. I know not how to bear it.”75

This level of self-pity was seldom acceptable in naval officers’ wives, who felt pressured by their families and the public to remain stoic. They may also have wanted to spare their husbands feelings by outwardly showing that all would be well at home, despite the inherent fiction in such a display. Wives may have been able to cope quite well, but the additional duties and the anxiety of separation and fear weighed heavily. The sadness expressed by Frances Boscawen at the departure of her husband was certainly heartfelt, but her own father often upbraided her for her pessimistic attitude. “My father read me a sort of lecture concerning your absence,” she wrote to Edward, “— which I was to rejoice, not grieve at.”76 Officers’ correspondents had to find the right balance between sadness and support. Husbands were not to be unduly concerned for their wives’ emotional well-being, but it would also not do to sound too happy about the separation.

Frances Nelson was again seen by Nelson’s biographers to be found wanting in this respect. What remains unclear is how much of this portrait of Fanny as the whining, unsupportive wife who harassed poor Nelson when he should have been concerned with

75 Vickery, Gentleman’s Daughter, 65.
76 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 53.
his duties was contemporary and how much was expressed in retrospect as justification for the gallant Nelson’s abandonment of his wife for another woman. Much has been made by those looking for fault in Fanny’s behavior of a letter sent by Edmund Nelson to his daughter after Captain Nelson prepared to leave Fanny for his first command after their marriage. In the letter, Mr. Nelson writes “Poor Mrs N will, I hope, bear up with a degree of cheerfulness at the separation from so kind a husband.” Yet if a wife were too cheerful at her husband’s leaving, he might then suspect that his departure was not deeply felt. This seems to be a knife’s edge proposition, viewed with the wisdom of hindsight.

Boscawen did not complain of his wife’s frequent bouts of melancholy and depression each time he left her. In fact, he frequently wrote with concern for her health. Whether he was flattered by the image of his wife being so loving and devoted that she was bedridden with grief over the separation or had genuine apprehension about her well-being, Boscawen not only allowed his wife to behave in this way, but encouraged it. Her father’s scolding notwithstanding; Fanny’s emotional letters to Boscawen also allowed her to contrast her depressed behavior with the image of active estate manager once her grief had passed.

Spending almost the first five years of their marriage together on shore was a unique experience for most naval wives and may have been the reason that Fanny Nelson was not adequately prepared for separation from her husband. However, the couple was often separated during their engagement, with Fanny carrying out hostess duties for her uncle on Nevis while Nelson patrolled the West Indies in the Boreas. This experience

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77 Hardy, 80.
78 Lloyd, 177.
may have given Fanny a taste of what was to come, however she was at her childhood home with her family, not in Norfolk with her aged father-in-law.

Frances Boscawen’s first separation from her husband began only a few weeks after their marriage. Henrietta Rodney, having married the admiral conveniently between wars, was not immediately left alone. Louisa Hardy spent the first five months of her marriage with her husband, but she did so on his ship in the Chesapeake Bay from December 1806 to April 1807. There was no set formula for the amount and time of separation for the shore wives and their husbands. War, illness, promotion, and patronage determined togetherness and couples had to adjust as necessary in order to ensure the all-important naval career.

Naval officers’ wives understood the inevitable separation and fully appreciated that serving at sea, especially during time of war, was valuable to their husbands’ careers. Full-pay, promotion, valuable awards, and pensions awaited those successful naval commanders and could make a family financially secure for a lifetime and possibly that of their children. Henrietta Rodney showed an acute understanding of the situation when writing to her husband during his service in the American Revolution concerning a rumor that he would be selected to command the Channel Fleet. Even though this command would put him closer to his family, Henrietta writes, “I do not believe, nor do I think you wou’d like it for tho a great compliment yet the being here under Admiralty orders canot be so agreeable to you, nor so profitable as your present station.” This sentiment illustrates that she not only understood the amount of scrutiny and control the Admiralty

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79 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 14.
80 Syrett, Rodney Papers Volume II, 4-5.
81 Gore, 40-41.
had over the Channel Fleet, but also that serving in the West Indies was, while certainly
dangerous, more financially lucrative. All shore wives had to cope with the conflict
between safety and financial security. That they did so with such understanding and
practicality shows that they, as a group, firmly grasped the realities of life. Perhaps this
was why Fanny Boscawen’s father believed that his daughter should “rejoice” at being
parted with her husband.

Letter writing was not a new task for women. Vickery contends that “letter
writing was a key component of female business.”83 The shore wives participated in both
personal and public letter writing on a massive scale. Correspondence between naval
officers and their wives are invaluable sources in analyzing the lives of this group of
women, and the fact that the primary form of communication for months or even years
was limited to a written form with irregular delivery is significant. It illustrates the level
of frustration each may have had with the other, which might manifest itself in additional
pressures for the wife. For example, both Admiral Nelson and Henrietta Rodney began
many of their letters by reporting the dates of the most recent letters received. At times,
the dates of receipt were wildly out of order. Nelson once received a letter from Fanny in
late May dated the previous December. Without the financial authority granted to other
shore wives, Lady Rodney required her husband’s permission for her daughter to take
lessons (“Jenny is impatient for your answer about her Learning the Harpsichord”) and
wrote to him several times on the matter.84 It is unclear, however, whether the letters
were not delivered or Rodney chose not to answer. His letters show that he was usually
attentive in such matters.

83 Vickery, “Golden Age to Separate Spheres?”, 409.
84 PRO 30/20/21/1
One of Nelson’s biographers’ most repeated critiques of Fanny was that she was inattentive. However, when Nelson was serving on the Agamemnon, Fanny wrote at least two letters in November 1794 and at least five letters the following month. In one letter dated 27 November, she lamented, “your not receiving any letters lately from me truly gives me concern. Many are at Gibraltar, [where Nelson had suggested they be sent] I never missed but one packet and that was owing to Mr. Suckling’s [Nelson’s uncle] expecting you I may say daily.”

Nelson himself did not scold Fanny for being lax in letter writing. He reassures her when her letters are hung up in Gibraltar, writing “I think that my not having lately received a letter from you is owing to myself having desired you to direct you for Gibraltar”.

Nelson is kind and does not take the opportunity, when he has not received her letters, to berate her or accuse her of being inattentive. Their relationship at this time still seems loving. Fanny’s past mistakes seem to have been forgotten.

The speed with which letters traveled between a naval officer and his wife depended on many factors, including where the officer was stationed, the means of transportation, and the wife’s location. Determining the best way to control these factors could be extremely complicated. One of the reasons Nelson wanted Fanny to purchase a home was so that he would have one place to send correspondence. “’Tis a sad thing not to know where to direct [letters] to you,” he wrote in 1793. At one point, Boscawen instructed Fanny to “write and send your letters to Mostyn; he will have opportunities of sending your letters to me, and as soon as you know he is sailed, direct them to the care

85 Nelson, 259.
86 Nelson, 121.
87 Hardy, 139.
of Frederick Rogers, Esq., Commission of the Navy at Plymouth Dock. He will forward them to me."\(^{88}\) Sending letters through friends could be a risky option, as Boscawen discovered when one of his letters with instructions regarding the family farm went missing. "As you do not mention the letter I sent you by Mr. Phil. Meddows, I am afraid he forgot to send it to you, which he promised to do as he passed through the town of Guildford . . . However it must be somewhere, and upon enquiry you will hear of it, though its not being received in time will disappoint me about the mare, etc. etc."\(^{89}\) Boscawen sent letters by any means he could find, using friends, commanders of ships destined for England, and the admiralty packet.

Henrietta Rodney also came to distrust sending letters through friends and urged her husband to send his letters through the packet. She implores her husband, "pray never send your letters by private hand, such as friends – I always receive them instantly when they come to the Admiralty."\(^{90}\) Expressing her opinion regarding the packet, she wrote, "I never fail by the Packet which I think both the safest and the quickest of any."\(^{91}\) Even using the packet was no guarantee of a speedy receipt. In her letter to her husband dated 7 July 1780, Henrietta explains that she received his letter dated 27 May 1780 on 6 July; a duration of 41 days. She seems to think this a fairly rapid exchange.\(^{92}\) She also complained to Rodney that many of her letters were hung up in transit: "I am all out of patience at the number of letters I have wrote the greatest of which are still at Torbay."\(^{93}\)

\(^{88}\) Lloyd, 200.
\(^{89}\) Lloyd, 202-203.
\(^{90}\) PRO 30/20/21/1
\(^{91}\) PRO 30/20/21/1
\(^{92}\) PRO 30/20/21/1
\(^{93}\) PRO 30/20/21/1
Frances Boscawen wrote nearly every day, and even kept a daily journal, sending sections of it to her husband at certain intervals. Boscawen was also prolific. In April 1755, shortly after leaving Fanny for the American coast, the Admiral wrote ten letters over a period of nineteen days. Henrietta Rodney also wrote whenever she had the opportunity, explaining in one letter “The convoy is to sail the first fair wind & tho’ I have nothing to say having wrote you a few days ago, yet I write because I always do by every opportunity I know of.” However, the letter covers several days and is five pages long.\textsuperscript{94}

The content of the letters varied, as is to be expected, depending on the personality of the writer. Letters between the Boscawens were effusive. In between comments about the price of hay and mowing the walk, Edward would declare “Don’t conceive I live one day without thinking of you.”\textsuperscript{95} This sentiment demonstrates how much both his family and his estate were on his mind. Edward’s emotional outbursts during correspondence mirror those of his wife. They are either truly in love or desperate to reassure each other.

Letters from the officers illustrate the monotony of naval life. Wives were treated to details about wind speed, “tis now start calm, and in all appearance it will soon produce an easterly wind” and naval engagements, “at 1 a.m. the Captain having passed the sternmost of the enemy ships which formed part of their van . . . we on the starboard tack, the Admiral made the signal to tack in succession”.\textsuperscript{96} Although Boscawen included his share of mundane details, he owned to Fanny “you seemed to dislike the trite account

\textsuperscript{94} PRO 30/20/21/1
\textsuperscript{95} Lloyd, 178-179.
of wind and weather which was almost the whole my journal afforded, and the daily occurrences of a sea life are scarce intelligible to you,” and then went on to tell her about what he called his ship’s meager entertainment, describing dancers “and a good scraper [fiddle player] to play to them.”

Letters from wives could also be uninteresting. Feeling the pressure to write, both partners could be reduced to filling space. It is possible that in these long and somewhat boring letters, the partners were being dutiful, but it is also possible that they were trying to prove their loneliness, true or not. Again, the letters show the shore wives and their husband’s consciousness of the effects of separation and how each wanted to be perceived. Wives, even when describing pleasurable events, often ended with the caveat that it would have been much more enjoyable had their husbands also attended. They were careful not to be seen as having too much fun while home alone, least their husbands believe they were not truly missed.

However, near-constant correspondence was the only way to maintain a marriage across such distances. For both sides, even the monotonous details about wind direction or the children’s writing skills may have been welcomed. Fanny Boscawen alludes to this need in her journal in 1756, confessing, “I fancy it is, that as writing is the natural relief of absence, so when the absence seems as it were, ended, that relief becomes less necessary.”

Unfortunately, some letters described less mundane occurrences. One of the greatest fears of the shore wives was that their husbands may be killed or injured at sea. Letters describing the dangers did little to allay those fears. Cuthbert Collingwood

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97 Lloyd, 178.
98 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 211.
described in detail his leg wound at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 to his wife Sarah, writing “did I not tell you how my leg was hurt? It was by a splinter—a pretty severe blow. I had a good many thumps . . . You know nearly all were killed or wounded on the quarterdeck and poop but myself, my Captain, and Secretary.”99 Earlier, after the Battle of Cape St. Vincent in 1797, Collingwood had described something else to his wife that probably made her uneasy. “I have got a Spanish double-headed shot . . . which I intend as a present to your father, to put amongst his curiosities: it weighs 50 lbs. These are no jokes, when they fly about one’s head.” Then ending, “God bless you! my dearest love; may you ever be happy.”100

Boscawen, ever ready to share any and all news with his beloved wife, described not only his own illnesses, but fears of illness and widespread fever among the crew. “The whole ship’s company have chilblains on their hands and feet . . . What is still worse, we have an ugly fever in the ship which has gone through the common men . . . we have lost 20 men by it.”101 Letters sometimes provided little comfort for the reader, except for the fact that the writer had clearly survived long enough to send them. Close reading of these letters gives details about navy life and many occurrences, in addition to battles, that would cause wives to worry. Illness, especially contagious diseases could spread rapidly in the confined space of a ship. After all, it was a quarantine that kept Edward Boscawen from returning to Portsmouth to meet Fanny in 1755. Poor diet, exposure, lack of exercise also plagued Royal Navy ships. Very few would die a glorious death in battle as did Nelson.

100 Warner, 69.
101 Lloyd, 188.
The majority of correspondence about naval battles described strategy and tactics, as well as academic details about naval engagements. Nelson was a master at this. While cruising the Mediterranean in the *Agamemnon*, he derisively told Fanny of a great victory which might have been: “We were just getting up with them again being within reach of grape shot,” when Admiral Hotham made the signal to discontinue the action. . . . Had Lord Hood been here . . . the van [fleet] of the English might now have been covered with glory.”

Collingwood, when not distressing his wife with tales of double-headed Spanish shot, was quite the storyteller. The beginning of his letter to Sarah about Cape St. Vincent reads as if the man were retelling it sitting back in his chair before a roaring fire. “We very soon came up with the next [ship]” he relates, “so close alongside, that a man might jump from one ship to the other. Our fire carried all before it; and in ten minutes she hauled down her colours; but I had been deceived once.”

Clearly, these men believed that their wives were entitled to know what they were doing professionally. The shore wives were hardened, trusted partners. In a letter to her husband in May 1780, Henrietta Rodney explains that although people had asked her to share what Rodney wrote to her regarding naval engagements, she assures him that she is keeping his confidence and is careful not to start rumors or gossip. “I am even so causious that I am even afraid of repeating what I hear by common report least they sho’ld say they had it from me & suppose there was some foundation in it.”

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102 Grape shot consists of small iron balls housed in a canister. That canister can be fired from a cannon. The small shot can do tremendous damage when fired at close range.
103 Nelson, 215-216.
104 Warner, 68.
105 PRO 30/20/21/1
The letters, of course, flatter the writers, but also show the need to share triumphs, defeats, hopes, and fears. The more frightening stories demonstrate that despite the élan with which the husbands, such as Collingwood, wrote, they may have needed the reassurance that comes with sharing a fear to a close someone. In all ways, the shore wives fit this description. Nelson wrote to Fanny in moments of despair and self-pity. One letter describes the aftermath of a storm and the lesson it had taught him. “I ought not to call what has happened to the Vanguard [Nelson’s command in 1798] by the cold name of accident,” he confessed, “I believe firmly that it was the Almighty’s goodness to check my consumate vanity. I hope it has made me a better officer, as I feel confident it has made me a better man.”

There is also much evidence that some shore wives truly understood their husband’s profession. Henrietta Rodney showed that she grasped at least her husband’s version of the abilities of the Royal Navy during the American Revolution when she wrote to him, saying “I find Adm’l Arbuthnot has sent you into Line of Battle from America – I trust in God the French will not attack you – . . . it’s impossible to describe any anxiety about you at present knowing their superior numbers & the little support you had from your own officers there is every thing to be dreaded.” Once again, her support enabled her husband to continue to believe he was surrounded by incompetence. Henny conveys her devotion to Rodney as well as her unshakable belief in his rightness, at least in naval matters. She is less resolute in her comments about their financial situation, but even then she submissively clarified by writing “I wish most sincerely to do

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106 Nelson, 396.
107 PRO 30/20/21/1
Every Thing that wou’d be agreeable to you & to act in such a maner as I think you wou’d do were you on the shore.”

Letters from the wives show how distressed they were at the thought of their husbands’ being injured or killed. Well-meaning family members kept Edward Boscawen’s injury by musket ball secret from his pregnant wife, in case she heard the news and miscarried. Eventually she was told, but only after she had ordered a *Gazette* and would have read the details. In her joyful letter to her husband, she explains “My father . . . never lost sight of me, lest I should hear of your wound, which being ignorant of, I was almost out of my wits for joy.” But hearing of his wound changed her opinion of the battle off Finisterre. “Yet I own your being hurt at all,” she confessed, “changed the whole face of affairs in my eyes.”

Henrietta Rodney shares her reaction to the conflicting reports about the Royal Navy’s progress in the West Indies with Admiral Rodney, bemoaning “one day you are victorious the next defeated.” One story was “that you had conquered but lost your life.” She explains her stress at the thought of his being injured or killed: “but I do assure you that if a particular loud knock comes to the door, or any one speaks in a Hurry I am thrown into such a flurry that I know not what to do.” Sarah Collingwood reportedly fainted in a shop in Newcastle after a coachman inadvertently spread the false news that the victory at Trafalgar had claimed the lives of all of the British Admirals.

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108 PRO 30/20/21/1
109 Aspinall-Oglander, 42-43.
110 PRO 30/20/21/1
Financial issues were also discussed in letters between husband and wife. Depending on the length of separation and the amount of trust the husband had in his partner, shore wives could have a lot of financial control, more so than other wives of the period. While most wives handled household finances and often had “pin money,” shore wives sometimes carried power of attorney, were responsible for making large purchases including land or houses, making and controlling investments, paying taxes, and the outlay of personal grants, loans, and financial patronage. Yet these women were not seen as a threat to male power. On the contrary, as serving officers’ wives, they were extensions of their husbands, but extensions with power. Monetary control is another example of where, despite the apparent restrictions on women as the ideology of “separate spheres” took root near the end of the eighteenth century, the shore wives prove that women had a public role. Certainly most shore wives received advice from their husbands regarding financial matters, but they were given much latitude in which to use their own judgment.

The level of financial control given to officers’ wives of course varied. Henrietta Rodney had little control over her husband’s income and had to press him constantly for money.\textsuperscript{112} This, however, had more to do with his past financial difficulties than any lack of ability on her part. He may have been better served if he had allowed Henrietta more control. Her financially constrained background should have provided her with experience in economizing. The Rodneys’ financial problems caused them to rely on agents to handle even the most personal remittances. One letter from Rodney’s agent

\textsuperscript{112} PRO 30/20/21/1
Richard Kee in 1772 requests “if you [Rodney] will remit me I shall pay the staymakers &c.”

Henny Rodney was on the front lines, dealing with the admiral’s debts, creditors, and agents, but was hamstrung by her lack of financial control. This caused her stress and embarrassment. She shared her feelings with her husband in a strongly worded letter dated February 1781, saying “I must say I think it was a very bad scheme to order all the debt in before there was a farthing to pay & not one farthing can I get for this Mr. Jackson do’s not pay a penny into Drummonds of the salary and as to the Pension it’s not yet settled . . . it embarrass me very much.”

Because she was not in charge of her husband’s monetary matters, Henny also found herself the victim of miscommunication. One visitor “called this morning & said you had commissioned him to take a large country house for you which amazed me.” The agent told her that Rodney wanted the house because he planned to be home by spring. Henrietta was totally taken aback and sent the man away. This situation distressed and confused her. Her letter betrays her anxiety. She wondered if Rodney was indeed coming home and why he did not consult her about the country house. She took the opportunity in the rest of her letter to offer Rodney her advice on real estate in case he did plan on making such a purchase, but then turned quickly to discussing money. Rodney had his money, or perhaps loans or credit, with so many people and institutions that Henny was unsure as to how much was available or from where she could access it. While this secretiveness may illustrate a lack of trust in his wife, it is more probable that his situation was so tenuous that he felt the

113 Syrett, Rodney Papers, Volume II, 111.  
114 PRO 30/20/21/1  
115 PRO 30/20/21/1
need to keep it under his personal control. The admiral may also have been embarrassed by his debts and hoped to keep the details from his wife. In another letter a frustrated Henrietta comes forcefully to the point, “pray from whom now am I to receive my money?”

Fanny Boscawen was an heiress in her own right, but did not feel financially strained so did not press her father for the money owed her from her late mother’s estate. However he did manage to part with money periodically. In a journal entry in 1748 she told her husband, “I have half a year’s interest on 24 thousand odd hundred pounds due to me from my father.” Her husband trusted her to make financial decisions from the beginning of their marriage. She bragged to Boscawen, “I am so good an economist that I am never distressed.” Fanny kept her husband appraised of family finances, including investments, savings, debt levels, and expenses.

Fanny Nelson seemed to have a strong handle on her family’s finances. In addition to pressing recipients of Nelson’s patronage for cash, she actively pursued her son’s inheritance from the Nisbet family, as well as her own inheritance when her uncle died. She was not hesitant to use lawyers, agents, or the courts to get what she needed. Both inheritances were hampered by being linked to Nevis, not Britain. Fanny was still fighting for them when Nelson was killed. It is unclear whether the situation was ever resolved in her favor.

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116 PRO 30/20/21/1
117 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 15.
118 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 72.
119 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 72.
120 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 213.
121 Hardy, 291.
Lady Nelson also made loans to family members without having to consult her husband. In April 1799, she loaned her brother-in-law £200 through her (and Nelson’s) agent Alexander Davison.\(^{122}\) Other letters to Davison make it clear that Fanny was responsible for paying taxes, sometimes with little help from Davison himself. She wrote, “I said in this printed paper Mr. Davison would give in Lord Nelson’s income, Mr. R has desired that I would write the following message – “Mr. Davison will please to state the income of Lord Nelson that Lady Nelson may make a return agreeable to the act in Bath who producing a certificate that the Tax is paid elsewhere will of course be discharged from the charge in Bath” will you have the goodness to write the Comis[sioner], or the proper person on this subject?”\(^{123}\)

One charge against Fanny by the biographers that carries some weight is that she seemed reluctant to, or lacked the courage to, purchase a home. Fanny’s defender Shelia Hardy claims that this was due to a lack of communication between Fanny and Nelson, but his letters clearly express his desire for a house to be purchased.\(^{124}\) Nelson provided details about their finances, telling Fanny in 1798 “that £2000 can be spared for a home.”\(^{125}\) Fanny sent multiple letters to Nelson describing various homes and waited on his response before acting, but he was fighting in the battles off Cape St. Vincent and Camperdown during the time and unable to respond in a timely manner. Instead of acting on her own, Fanny waited for Nelson’s advice. However, by the time she received his letters, the house in question was no longer available or additional problems had been found. When Fanny did finally purchase their house at Roundwood, Nelson did find fault

\(^{122}\) DAV 2/9, 2/10.  
\(^{123}\) DAV 2/12.  
\(^{124}\) Hardy, 139-157.  
\(^{125}\) Hardy, 143.
with it. A sympathetic view of Fanny’s indecisiveness may conclude that she feared Nelson’s disapproval, so sought to protect herself by getting his endorsement before the purchase was made. However, other shore wives seem to have taken the initiative and made the decision alone.\textsuperscript{126} When Admiral Pellew was unsuccessful in finding a home, his wife Susan completed negotiations without him and purchased property in Christow. She later found a house nearby.\textsuperscript{127} Susan Pellew, as discussed earlier, was confident in her expanded duties and managed quite well without her husband at home.

Financial difficulties or even ruin were not typically caused by the wife’s lack of management skills. “Women simply did not have ultimate control over the disposal of fixed assets, capital, and income, and their allocated portion of housekeeping money was largely directed towards maintaining children and home.”\textsuperscript{128} However, this was not always the case for officers’ wives. Other women of the period also wielded financial and political responsibilities, mostly by their own choice or sense of duty to a politically connected family. In fact Judith Lewis points out in her book \textit{Sacred to Female Patriotism}, that “women of rank [during the mid- to late-eighteenth century] were expected to use the power at their disposal. To do so wisely was to be a patriot.”\textsuperscript{129} It is possible that the shore wives, although most of them were not of the same social class that Lewis describes, also felt this pressure. Certainly they could be seen as patriotic; after all they were standing in place of their officer husbands. What is different is that most shore wives were not from aristocratic families and did not have much experience in

\textsuperscript{126} Hardy, 143. Knight, 593. Parkinson, 394-395.
\textsuperscript{127} Parkinson, 394-395.
\textsuperscript{128} Barker and Chalus, 201.
\textsuperscript{129} Judith Lewis, \textit{Sacred to Female Patriotism: Gender, Class, and Politics in Late Georgian Britain}. (New York: Routledge, 2003) 128.
political power. It could be said that Susan Pellew, by disapproving of her husband’s standing for parliament, was positively against becoming involved in politics.

Shore wives, despite their family backgrounds, were forced by circumstance to make decisions without instructions or guidance from their partners. Some had much more control over family finances, making large purchases such as property and other assets. Most at minimum had to take care of large bills, taxes, and other financial responsibilities during their husbands’ absences. Several wives were given power of attorney and dealt with their husband’s legal issues in addition to financial responsibilities.

In the absence of their husbands, officers’ wives became virtual agents of naval patronage. The practice was so widespread in the eighteenth century that it is hard to believe that anyone, especially someone from the aristocratic or middling classes, would be unfamiliar with it. Yet being aware of the practice and knowing intimately how it worked were two different things. Patronage was practiced by men and women during the eighteenth century. “Women, like men, sought the five Ps of patronage—place, pension, preferment, Parliament, and peerage—with the object of obtaining something for themselves, something for their family members, or something for others.”¹³⁰ Judith Lewis puts it more bluntly, asserting that “wherever one looks, there were women helping men get placed in life.”¹³¹ Elaine Chalus uses Lady Henry Beauclerk’s “extended campaign for patronage” from the Duke of Newcastle to show “that women could have a sophisticated understanding of the workings of the patronage system and use their

¹³¹ Lewis, 84.
knowledge to make calculated requests.”¹³² Newcastle’s records show that ten percent of patronage requests he received were from women. But Chalus cautions that that number should not be seen as absolute. “Not only [do the records] omit entirely that portion of patronage that was negotiated face-to-face in predominantly social situations, but it is also an incomplete record of women’s written requests.”¹³³

Naval officers’ wives, being mostly from the middling classes, were probably familiar with patronage, if only at the local level. Naval captains, commanders, and admirals were often asked to become patrons of young boys wanting to go to sea. This connection not only allowed boys to find places as midshipmen, but also helped them earn promotions. Even though there were minimum terms of service and examinations in order to reach the rank of lieutenant in the Royal Navy, the eighteenth-century British navy ran on patronage. Lewis makes use of many examples to show how the influence of well-connected aristocratic women was used to gain promotion from those qualified commissioned officers. These were exactly the type of women, including Jane, Duchess of Gordon, Elizabeth, Duchess of Southerland, and Lavinia, Countess Spencer (wife of a First Lord of the Admiralty) with who shore wives sought a connection. Harriet, Countess of Bessborough, who was Earl Spencer’s sister, warned a friend seeking to promote the fortunes of one Captain Campbell, “I don’t know whether I shall succeed [in getting the support of her brother, but he had] been very good and done three of four jobs of that kind for me.”¹³⁴

¹³² Vickery, Women, Privilege, and Power, 57, 66.
¹³³ Vickery, Women, Privilege, and Power, 66.
¹³⁴ Lewis, 83.
The wives of Boscawen, Rodney, and Nelson were all actively involved in the naval patronage network. When Rodney accepted his new command at the beginning of the American Revolution, several young men and old favorites were transferred to his care.¹³⁵ Henrietta passed on inquiries made to her, possibly by a person who thought her easier to approach, about those desirous of a position. “Your last letter my dear girl I received and will take of Mr. Leak’s relation. You may assure him so,” Rodney wrote her in 1779.¹³⁶ She also informed Rodney when those who received his patronage did not act with what she thought was due graciousness. “I hope you do not write to Taylor, he is an old good for nothing wretch – has said many [undecipherable] things when he found his son was not the first made a captain he never calls on me which I rejoice for I cou’d not have patience with him.”¹³⁷ Henrietta may have had a good teacher in the way patronage could be used for personal financial gain. Some women used patronage networks to secure a pension for themselves or family members. Henny’s sister-in-law, Maria Constantia Nethercott, played on her family connections in an attempt to secure a pension for herself, writing “my family for many Generations past of both sides have been Servants of the Crown, the Rodney’s always in the Navy & Army, my Grandfather Sir Henry Newton was twenty one Years Minister at Genoa & Florence.”¹³⁸

Fanny Nelson was repeatedly asked by her husband to correspond with those who had received his patronage. Often, she was told to ask them for monies owed. In April 1798, Nelson wrote, “I wish you would write to Mr. Cooper and say that I have put myself to great inconvenience in advancing money for his son and desire him to repay

¹³⁵ Syrett, Rodney Papers Volume II, 249-250.
¹³⁶ Syrett, Rodney Papers Volume II, 296.
¹³⁷ PRO 30/20/21/1
¹³⁸ Vickery, Women, Privilege, and Power, 73-74.
you according to my desire.”¹³⁹ Fanny did follow-up, but later replied “Mr. Hoste [the father of another boy whom Nelson assisted] has taken no further notice. Mr. Cooper is an infamous character, you will never get your money.”¹⁴⁰

The shore wives’ active participation in naval patronage networks again shows how involved they were in their husbands’ careers. These partnerships were successful not because each person took on conventional gender-specific roles, but because the shore wives accepted, and effectively performed, additional duties. This competent assistance had to have helped the life of a naval officer be a little less stressful.

Accustomed to the companionate relationship she had with her husband, a shore wife would be forced to establish or reestablish the relationship with her father, other male relatives, or naval agents, for protection, financial support, or to assist them in managing their money or their relationship with the Admiralty. The dynamics were, obviously, not the same. This situation could also be stressful. Shore wives could find themselves torn between taking the advice of their father over that of their husband. This had to be difficult to manage. Some wives managing the paternal relationship better than others. Fanny Nelson and her aged father-in-law Reverend Edmund Nelson relied, peacefully, on each other. Fanny Boscawen and Sarah Collingwood would often rely on their fathers, but with different results. Fanny’s father took to scolding her for her extreme sadness at her husband’s departure.¹⁴¹ Sarah’s father, John Blackett, assisted her in mismanaging the admiral’s fortune.¹⁴² Collingwood’s letters to his sister Mary

¹³⁹ Nelson, 393.
¹⁴⁰ Nelson, 431.
¹⁴¹ Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 53.
¹⁴² Warner, 220.
demonstrated his anger over the fact that his estate was losing money and his father-in-law had used his name to cover a £2200 debt. “I have wrote to my wife to say I entirely disapprove of my being engaged in any body’s business but my own,” he wrote in 1809, but he personally did not blame Sarah. 143 “My wife would gladly confine herself to what I prescribe,” he explains, “but the gaiety, the vanity, and the love of feeding of her father, there is no bounds to.” 144 His opinion could be colored by devotion or a lack of faith in his wife’s financial acumen. It seems clear, however, that the assistance Blackett provided to Sarah was to the detriment of her husband.

Some wives were taken advantage of or treated in a manner which they may have been spared had their husbands been at home. Henrietta Rodney’s experiences as a wife alone show that even with a male companion nearby, deception could take place. In a letter dated 29 November 1780, she recounts a fraud perpetrated against her at a naval yard:

_I must tell you what a trick I was served the other day, I received a note, as from the Mate of a Jamaica Ship laying at Deptford to inform me they has cases of sweetmeats on Board & so desire that I wou’d send for them & begged I wou’d pay the may for his trouble that brought me the letter as all their men belonging to the ship were pressed I gave a shilling, which Robert [a friend] said the man grumbled at Exceedingly what he had no more – but not more had he from me, I got Mr. [indecipherable] to go on Board, but neither the man that wrote was to be found or any cases for me – these kinds of frauds are very much the fashion this year._ 145

Henrietta’s last thought is disturbing. Wives of men serving in all ranks of the Royal Navy were desperate for news and cut off from regular communication. A naval wife in a dockyard would have been an easy target for con men. Their husbands could easily have

143 Warner, 220.
144 Warner, 221.
145 PRO 30/20/21/1
sent packages or letters to them to be delivered by seamen from some other vessel. A small token in payment for delivery would not be out of place. The emotional turmoil of disappointed hope was probably more devastating than being conned out of a shilling.

Shore wives with husbands serving at sea were devoted to their husbands’ careers, wrote detailed letters, accepted additional duties, and were known to be doing so. In an intimate family circle or to the British public, the actions of the shore wives helped shape their image. It was in their own interest to be seen as supportive, but other factors, including newspaper articles, caricatures, and novels of the period fashioned the perception of the shore wives to the public and to themselves.
Chapter 4

The Perception of the Shore Wife

The overall perception of a shore wife by the public was shaped by images, biographies, novels, and the behavior of the woman herself. Naval captains and admirals skilled or lucky enough to have participated in great battles became public figures. Their wives, although to a lesser extent, shared in this public adulation. This was a new experience for most of the shore wives. While Fanny Nelson may have been well known in Nevis, her visibility would have been nothing compared to her public role as wife of the Hero of the Nile. Fanny’s prestige rose or fell based on her husband’s heroics or notorious behavior. Henrietta Rodney’s family was quite obscure, but her marriage to the admiral aligned her immediately with a public figure.

Images reinforced the ideal of the patriotic naval wife. In 1782, the *Lady’s Magazine* published a print titled “The Patriotic Parting.” [Figure A] In this print, an officer’s wife stands on the shore waving to her husband as he goes off to join his ship. This wife is not crying, and in fact looks rather stoic. The child clings to his mother’s skirt, but turns his face to show that he is also bearing up. The message of this print is clear. It was the patriotic duty of wives to send their husbands off to serve with no tears or fuss. The extended arm is not even actively waving, but passively holding the cloth.146

Figure A “The Patriotic Parting”

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66 'The Patriotic Parting',
from the Lady's Magazine (1782)
For the most part, the shore wives seemed to conform, at least outwardly, to this image. Frances Boscawen is again the exception. However it is Fanny Nelson who is most often accused of weakness and whining. This accusation begins with a letter which Nelson’s father, Reverend Edmund Nelson, wrote to his son soon after the *Agamemnon* sailed in 1793, in which he expresses hope that Fanny would be able to bear her husband’s absence. However, this letter does not describe Fanny breaking down or being emotionally distraught. It could just as easily reflect a father’s own sadness at his son’s departure, projected onto Fanny, a woman. Fanny’s own letters to Nelson at this time show her strength and willingness to support him in any way she could.

It is possible that “The Patriotic Parting” influenced the way the shore wives behaved, at least in public, but it is more probable that it influenced non-military viewers the most. It is a powerful image and portrays the shore wife as noble, devoted, and brave in the face of sacrifice. Of course no one could live up to these ideals, but it may have stopped criticism of the shore wives for breaking free of their traditional gender roles in public. It would be difficult to fault a woman for strongly negotiating over a piece of property when she only did so because her brave husband was away serving his country.

Eighteenth-century cartoonists and caricaturists often portrayed women in their etchings. However most of these women were public figures, including royalty like Queen Charlotte, or prominent aristocratic women like Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Heroic admirals and military leaders also appeared, sometimes praised, sometimes skewered, in the illustrative press. While specific naval officers’ wives apparently did not appear in the etchings, they were affected by the way in which their

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147 Hardy, 84.
husbands were portrayed in public. They could be buoyed by their husband’s heroic status, angered by negative impressions, or hurt by public accusations of wrongdoing.

Some of James Gillray’s caricatures during the American Revolution featured Admiral Rodney.148 “Rodney Introducing de Grasse,” [Figure B] dated 7 June, 1782, shows the triumphant admiral presenting his prisoner, the French Vice-Admiral François de Grasse to King George III after the Battle of the Saintes. The caricature is not really about Rodney’s victory, but the fact that his political enemies had conspired to have him replaced before news of the Saintes reached London.149

![Figure B RODNEY introducing DE GRASSE](image)

Gillray followed this etching with “St. George & the Dragon” [Figure C] a few days later. In this caricature, a new St. George, George Rodney, slays the dragon, representing France, while Fox runs after him holding a coronet, a symbol of the barony


149 Gillray, *RODNEY introducing DE GRASSE*
that Rodney had been awarded.\textsuperscript{150} While historians have written a quite different portrait of Rodney, Gillray chose to portray him as a great hero, wronged by his political enemies.

\textbf{Figure C St. GEORGE & the Dragon}

Shore wives could be influenced by the public view of their husbands. Henrietta Rodney’s letters echo Gillray’s sentiments of hero worship and political persecution, but they also reflect her experience with an adoring public who seem to think Rodney the savior of the British navy. After commiserating with him over his lack of support in the West Indies, she shares the expectations of the people she is in contact with, stating, “I have frequently remarked . . . that they ought not to raise [their expectations] so high . . . but the answer has always been, ‘. . . we know Rodney, and can hope everything from his skill and bravery’.\textsuperscript{151} She informed her husband that his victories affected his Whig enemies, gleefully relating after Rodney seized the Dutch island of St. Eustatius in 1781, “this glorious news has been a thunderbolt to the opposition, very few of whom appeared

\textsuperscript{150} Gillray, \textit{St. GEORGE & the Dragon}

\textsuperscript{151} Mundy, \textit{Admiral Lord Rodney, Volume the First}, 336.
in the House of Commons.”¹⁵² In one letter she suspects a conspiracy to ruin her husband’s reputation. A letter of his concerning an expedition in which Rodney expected success was published in the gazette, only to have the expedition fail. Rodney had apparently sent a second letter explaining the failure. Henrietta received a similar letter before the first one was published and wonders why the hopeful letter was ever published. The publication made Rodney look like a failure, and Henrietta wrote “the people’s expectations . . . were instantly crushed.”¹⁵³

Admiral Nelson also featured prominently in several of Gillray’s caricatures. After Nelson’s victory at the Nile, Gillray portrays the one-armed admiral as a hero beating off French crocodiles with a club made of British oak.¹⁵⁴ Gillray’s most heroic portrait of Nelson is “The HERO of the NILE,” [Figure D] published December 1798. Nelson is portrayed with Gillray’s version of his coat of arms and wearing numerous honors, including foreign honors.¹⁵⁵

Figure D The HERO of the NILE

¹⁵² Mundy, Admiral Lord Rodney, Volume the Second, 52.
¹⁵³ PRO 30/20/21/1
¹⁵⁵ Gillray, The HERO of the NILE
While the overall view of this caricature is heroic, it does show Nelson’s short stature and his penchant for decorations. These images of her husband, Fanny could view with pride. A little over two years later, Gillray would begin to portray her husband not as hero, but as public adulterer. Horatio Nelson first met Emma Hamilton, and her husband Sir William Hamilton, in 1793. However it was during his extended stay in Naples from 1799 to 1801 after his victory in Egypt that the admiral’s romantic relationship with Lady Hamilton began.156

Emma Hamilton had a notorious reputation. She had supported herself by becoming a courtesan at an early age. Semi-legitimized by her marriage to William Hamilton, she was a favorite of the Neapolitan Queen Maria Carolina.157 However, she was not generally accepted in London society and Queen Charlotte refused to receive her. Emma’s past, as well as Nelson’s status as national hero made their affair newsworthy. The two did little to dispel the rumors.

“Dido in Despair” [Figure E] appeared in February 1801. This caricature shows an extremely overweight Emma Hamilton (who was pregnant with Nelson’s baby at the

156 Knight, 309-310.
157 Knight, 319-326.
time) crying because her hero has left her “with the old Antiques,” meaning her husband William, who was much older than Emma and also a collector of antiquities. While the records do not prove than Fanny ever saw this etching, she may well have known about it. Nelson’s affair with Lady Hamilton was public knowledge. They did not hide their affection. Fanny is the missing character in the piece. William Hamilton is shown sleeping beside the besotted Emma and Nelson is represented by the Fleet sailing away through the open window. The sexual nature of Emma and Nelson’s relationship is hinted at broadly. Emma is sitting on a bed wearing a nightgown. An open book on a settee shows drawings of a possibly pregnant female nude titled “Studies of Academic Attitudes, Taken from Life.” Another book, supposedly showing antiquities, shows a god chasing his female prey.\(^{158}\)

\[\text{Figure E DIDO IN DESPAIR}\]

\(^{158}\) Gillray, *DIDO IN DESPAIR*
A second caricature exposing the affair was published a few days later. [Figure F] This one portrays William Hamilton in an antique shop with portraits of Nelson as Mark Anthony and Emma as Cleopatra hanging on the wall, playing on Nelson’s reputation as the hero of the Nile. Nelson’s Mark Anthony wears an admiral’s uniform and reaches out to his Cleopatra, an overweight Emma with both breasts exposed and holding a bottle of gin. While these images of Emma Hamilton were not positive, they did portray her as Nelson’s lover. These etchings, coupled with the public humiliation of Fanny by Nelson on his return from Naples with both Emma and William Hamilton in tow, compounded Fanny’s painful predicament.

Fanny is not portrayed in the caricatures. It is important to Fanny’s reputation to examine why. It is possible that Gillray believed that Fanny was not at fault. Sir William Hamilton knew his wife’s history and reputation. He traveled with Nelson and Emma and could not possibly have been unaware of their growing affection. The three of them,

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159 Gillray, *A COGNOSCENTI CONTEMPLATING THE BEAUTIES OF THE ANTIQUE*
Nelson, Emma, and William, could be seen as in collusion. Gillray presented them as such. Gillray did not spare women. His sharp portrayals of Queen Charlotte and Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire are legendary. If Fanny had truly been known by her contemporaries as a cold, unfeeling sickly nag, as almost all of Nelson’s modern biographers portray her, surely a gifted satirist such as Gillray would have leaped at the chance to skewer her in print. It is quite possible that Fanny was not known as such. She had much public sympathy during the affair, even though the strength of Nelson’s fame and personality turned even her devoted father-in-law against her during the last years of Nelson’s life.\textsuperscript{160}

These caricatures not only show how the public might have been influenced by Gillray but also the artist’s own perception of the affair. By choosing not to depict Fanny he consciously, or unconsciously, shielded her. However, he did portray her husband as a philanderer, which was, of course, extremely hurtful to her.

This type of public attention was new for Fanny. She was accustomed to being portrayed as the perfect naval wife, loving, attentive, supportive, and faithful. The \textit{Bath Herald} published a poem in honor of the Nelsons’ arrival in 1797. The last few lines address Nelson’s perceived life: “Sooth’d with the blessings of domestic life/A reverend Father, and a faithful wife.”\textsuperscript{161} Like most women, Fanny felt that her loyalty should be rewarded. Instead, Nelson, for reasons which continue to be speculated about by biographers of both parties, left her for another woman.

While the public may well have laughed at the caricatures, most people were enormously supportive of Royal Navy officers and their patriotic wives during the late

\textsuperscript{160} Hardy, 237.

\textsuperscript{161} Knight, 255.
eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. One way in which the people, men and women, could show their support for the Royal Navy was to subscribe to Lloyds’ Patriotic Fund. This fund was set up to reward naval officers and their family members after successful victories. However, Lloyds had another, more pressing motive. The wars of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century made Lloyds of London the insurance headquarters of Europe. By 1809, “the level of risk covered annually at Lloyds’ was running at £100 million. The subscribers [investors] had an enormous stake in the security and success of the British merchant fleet and this was reflected in the large sums of money paid to senior naval officers either in cash or trophies of high value, with lesser sums to seamen and their families.”162 The ulterior motive of Lloyds was to entice Flag Officers and captains to continue to protect merchant fleets, even though it was less profitable than pursuing enemy ships, which could be captured as prizes.163 The public, rich and poor, could support the military by subscribing to the fund, although the majority of the donations came from wealthy patrons. Some of the money went to charitable purposes, and pensions were rewarded to injured or widowed persons.164

Some in the navy and the Admiralty were less enamored with “Lloyd’s rhetoric of charity and patriotism” and worried about the effect the rewards had on the navy. “St. Vincent complained of what he called a ‘mischievous system of rewards . . . which is held out to the navy as giving greater encouragement than the government of the country.’” The issue was also debated in the Naval Chronicle in 1807. Gradually the system of rewards fell out of favor and “in 1809, following Wellington’s victories in

163 Southam, 118.
164 Southam, 118.
Spain and Portugal, involving heavy casualties . . . the resources of the Fund were turned wholly to relieving hardship.”  

Fanny and other officers and their family members, as recipients of the largesse of the Patriotic Fund after Trafalgar, received money and valuables. Fanny accepted a vase valued at £500.  

Shore wives and their husbands sometimes featured in newspaper articles, poems, or novels, or were the subjects of biographies. Newspapers celebrated the victories and brave service of Boscawen, Rodney, and Nelson in their own time. All three were also praised in verse. “An Ode occasioned by the success of Admiral Boscawen, by a Gentleman of the University of Oxford” extols Boscawen’s heroic virtues. One stanza reads, “Tell them, my sons, to smite the sounding lyre/To brave Boscawen tune their noblest lays/His deeds shall every manly breast inspire/Each infant tongue shall lisp the Hero’s praise.”  

Admiral Rodney found himself in an enviable position when King George III and Queen Charlotte sent their son William Henry (later King William IV) to sea during the American Revolution. The prince served with Rodney. An anonymous poem published in 1780 praises not only Admiral Rodney, but the patriotic virtues of sending a son to war. The poem features lines such as “patriot virtue warm’d thy breast” and “now it [‘latent fire’] flames in Rodney’s breast/With faithful ancient zeal imprest/His country has his heart.”  

Both of these poems served to promote patriotism, not only among the people in support of a given war, but also for those serving. Poems, commemorative items, and the

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165 Southam, 118-119.
166 Southam, 111.
167 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 280.
168 Mundy, Volume the First, 234.
adoption of military dress all enhanced the feeling of camaraderie between the public and naval families. All citizens were in the war together. However much this was promoted, serving officers and their wives had very different experiences of war than those who did not fight. The poem about Lord Rodney also illustrates the importance of sending a child to fight. The sacrifice is for the greater good of the country. The image of “The Patriotic Parting” reinforces these sentiments as well.

Despite being called a ‘loyal wife’ by the Bath Herald, Fanny Nelson would be most famous as a cast-off wife. “Like the running warfare between the Prince and Princess of Wales, the intimate affairs of Lady Nelson, the Hamiltons, and Nelson himself made a fascinating scandal and public interest was fuelled by a succession of biographies.”169 The earliest of these postmortem biographies was The Life of Lord Nelson (1806), by James Harrison. The Life of Lord Nelson had Emma Hamilton’s full support, as she attempted to gain a government pension. In addition to the tension caused by the publication, the continued public speculation over the identity of the father of Emma Hamilton’s “adopted” daughter, Horatia Nelson Thomson also troubled Fanny Nelson.170

Another biography was a massive two-volume affair by the Reverend James Stanier Clarke and John M’Arthur, published in 1809. This, however, did not contain a deep historical review of the late Admiral’s life.171 Clarke and M’Arthur presented Nelson as a virtuous and patriotic hero. Historian Brian Southam refers to it as a “ceremonial account” and states that “there was no fear that this [biography] . . . would

169 Southam, 111.
170 Southam, 111.
171 Southam, 224-225.
carry the reader too far into the scandalous areas of Nelson’s private life – the entanglement with Lady Hamilton, the true identity of their daughter, passed off as their adoptive child, Horatia Nelson Thomson, and Nelson’s desertion of his wife.” Nelson’s family cooperated with this biography, providing letters and anecdotes, presumably with this understanding.  

As a response to this factually questionable version, Robert Southey wrote his Life of Nelson, published in 1813. Southam claims that the public was divided over Nelson’s relationship with Emma. “Some trusted Nelson’s word that their love was platonic.” Southey apparently agreed with this viewpoint and he described Emma as “a woman whose personal accomplishments have seldom been equaled, and whose powers of mind were not less fascinating than her person; a woman capable of creating heroes.” This attachment, however, led to the abandonment of Lady Nelson. Southey points to the abandonment and not to adultery as Nelson’s crime, mitigating his fault.

With the publication of The Letters of Lord Nelson to Lady Hamilton in 1814, all denial of a consummated affair seemed moot. These letters were published with the full, if silent, support of Lady Hamilton, who by this time was having serious financial difficulties. After having read this personal correspondence, Frances Lady Shelley remarked “And this is the man whom Southey holds up, as a model for all sailors! . . . If only it were possible to draw a veil across the private life of that great hero! Alas! a veil

172 Southam, 226.
173 Southam, 227.
174 Southam, 236.
175 Southam, 236.
176 Southam, 230.
is often necessary, in the domestic history of the world’s greatest men.” But for Frances Nelson, there would be no veil. The public humiliation would continue. Each new publication re-opened a painful wound.

In 1814, the *Edinburgh Review* published a thirteen-page article commenting on *The Letters of Lord Nelson to Lady Hamilton*. The paper decried Nelson’s “culpable disregard of domestic ties” and his “neglect, approaching to cruelty, of one to whom he was bound by honour, as well as religion, morality, and law, to cherish.” Fanny Nelson’s biographer Shelia Hardy seizes upon the negative opinions expressed in this article in order to prove her point that Nelson behaved abominably to his loyal and devoted wife. She described the reviewer as “astute” and gleefully claimed that he “quickly moved in to an attack that would have sickened Lady Hamilton.” This “attack” paragraph ends with a cogent point: “Nor can a more melancholy instance be found in the maxim, that we are apt to dislike those whom we have wronged, and thus preposterously to visit on them the sins of our own injustice.” This does not mean that Fanny Nelson was blameless. Perhaps she was not the most clever, confident, or engaging person. She may very well have nagged her husband and been weepy at his departures, but compared with other shore wives, she seems like a typical eighteenth-century wife. Henrietta Rodney often wrote to her husband about his debts and money troubles, even once demanding “Pray from whom now am I to receive my money?”

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177 Southam, 230-231.
178 Hardy, 300.
179 Southam, 231.
180 Hardy, 301.
181 Hardy, 301.
182 PRO 30/20/21/1
Frances Boscawen was depressed and bedridden at each of her husband’s departures. Compared to Emma Hamilton, a trained courtesan - to be honest, she was probably very plain and uninteresting. Nelson may well have fallen out of love with her, but that is hardly her fault. Southey’s point about taking your guilt out on those whom you have wronged fits perfectly with Nelson’s behavior toward Fanny once he was involved with Lady Hamilton. Of course there were terse letters and arguments before that time, but all married couples have experienced moments of tension.

The publication of Southey’s biography and Nelson’s letters to Emma coincided with Princess Caroline’s appeal to the Prince Regent regarding her daughter the Princess Charlotte. Prince George and Princess Caroline separated soon after the birth of their daughter, and lived separate lives. The Prince Regent had numerous mistresses but Caroline’s behavior during the separation was not entirely innocent, with rumors of a love affair with her Italian advisor. Caroline’s appeal was published in the *Morning Chronicle* in early 1813. Jane Austen writes to her sister in support of Caroline: “Poor Woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she *is* a Woman, & because I hate her Husband - . . . the intimacy said to subsist between her & Lady Oxford is bad. – I do not know what to do about it; - but if I must give up the Princess, I am resolved at least always to think that she would have been respectable, if the Prince had behaved only tolerably by her at first.”

Southam compares Princess Caroline’s marriage—“a history of humiliation and rejection played out in public”—to that of Frances Nelson. While it was true that the breakup of both Princess Caroline and Fanny Nelson’s marriages were played out on a

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183 Southam, 231.
public stage, Fanny had hardly behaved in the same way as Princess Caroline. However, both women received much public sympathy as the wronged wife.  

Southam does not speculate as to how much Jane Austen may have known about the Nelson-Hamilton affair (no letters on the subject survive) but points out the public nature of the affair from the cartoonist’s prints, the fact that the affair was common knowledge, and that “the Austens had the benefit of being on the naval network, a channel along which service rumours and gossip travelled freely.” So not only were strangers who read the newspapers aware of Fanny’s humiliation, but due to the “naval network” friends, acquaintances and other wives also knew. Southam postulates that Austen’s contempt for Nelson’s affair and betrayal of Fanny can be seen in her portrayal of Admiral Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, a character who brings his mistress into the house after the death of his wife.

If Austen did wish to restore the image of the patriotic and devoted shore wife, her portrayal of Mrs. Croft and Anne Elliot in the novel *Persuasion* certainly did so. The author also gives readers a glimpse into the stress and anxiety felt by those women whose husbands were in constant danger. Early in the novel, Austen reveals that Anne is aware of “every anxiety attending his [Captain Wentworth’s] profession” even though Anne herself is not from a naval family. Austen’s brothers served in the Royal Navy, so she is either projecting her knowledge on Anne or assuming that most people were aware of the stresses of being a shore wife.

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184 Southam, 231.
185 Southam, 234.
186 Southam, 234.
187 Austen, 27.
Anne fully accepts those dangers at the end of the story after marrying Wentworth. She embraces her husband’s naval career wholeheartedly. His profession, almost as much as his character, is a source of attraction or revulsion throughout the novel. Austen seeks to restore the good standing of naval officers, seen in the years after Trafalgar as new men with vast amounts of prize money but no breeding. Anne, writes Austen, “gloried in being a sailor’s wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to a profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance.”

Austen places Anne in the “profession” as well. She is not a bystander, but an active participant; a partner in the true sense of the word, like Fanny Boscawen, Henrietta Rodney, Susan Pellew, and the other eighteenth-century shore wives.

Images and novels may have shown shore wives the public perception of their position, but individual experiences and personalities seem to have had more influence on how shore wives actually behaved. Fanny Boscawen, Henrietta Rodney, and Fanny Nelson wanted to be seen as loyal and devoted. Their letters to their husbands are filled with reminders about how much they miss their husbands, how they are coping with their emotions, and how often they are writing to them. Surely much of this was genuine, but there was also an element of calculation. Perhaps by reminding their husbands of their devotion and sacrifice, the shore wives could persuade their husbands to be faithful. By discussing how much work they were doing on behalf of their husband, family, or estate, shore wives reminded their husbands of their effort and loyalty. They may have written constantly, or claimed to have done so, in an effort to guilt recipients into responding.

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188 Austen, 221.
This notion of self-perception or self-reflection sheds new light on the plaintive appeals in Fanny’s letters to Nelson’s agent Alexander Davison after her estrangement from the admiral. She begs her husband’s forgiveness in 1801, writing “Surely I have angered him – it was done unconsciously and without the least intention . . . And if he will have the goodness to send for me I will make it my study to obey him in every wish or desire of his – And with cheerfulness.” 189 In another letter, calling Nelson “My Lord & Master,” Fanny assures Davison of her “sincere desire to do every thing he [Nelson] wishes me I am willing to say more – if possible. – Should he receive me with affection I will do every thing he desires and in a gracious manner he shall have no reason to regret his goodness to me I give you My honor –.” 190 Those who wish to see Fanny Nelson as the architect of her own undoing put a lot of emphasis on her remarks about having angered her husband. However, was she truly at fault or was she playing the role of supplicant in hopes of regaining her husband’s good graces? She had not seen her husband in over three years. It seems impossible that she could have angered him so much via correspondence that he cast her off for another. It is more probable that Fanny was taking a tactic not unknown among abused women – claiming to be at fault in order to soothe the anger of their partner. The term “Lord & Master” is another way that Fanny sought to show herself as obedient to Nelson’s will. She often called Nelson “My Lord” in letters, but that was after he had actually become a Lord. “Lord & master” emphasize her humble subservience.

Fanny sent these letters to Davison because by 1801, Nelson had stopped accepting her letters. Fanny had to use whatever options were open to her to regain her

189 Hardy, 270.
190 DAV 2/51, emphasis original
status as wife. Without that what was she to be? As it turned out, the affair would end in 1805 with Nelson’s glorious death at the battle of Trafalgar. In widowhood, Fanny was at least assured of the country’s devotion and loyalty.
Chapter 5
Permanent Separation: Widowhood

These three women would also share another title, albeit in completely different ways. Each, in time, would become a widow. Widowhood in the mid- to late-eighteenth century offered a certain amount of freedom. However, the shore wives, empowered during their husbands’ often lengthy absences, already had a taste of that. Widowhood often meant loneliness. The shore wives, hardened by the long separations from their husbands, were not unfamiliar with loneliness. Life as a widow often brought financial strain. Naval officers and their wives worked hard to secure healthy pensions for themselves and their families.

Widowhood for naval officers’ wives was different in some ways than the widowhood of other middling-class women. For the shore wives, the prospect of death was a harsh reality every time their husbands were at sea. If a battle had taken place or seemed imminent, then the public and the press became actively involved in speculation. Henrietta Rodney wrote to her husband in June 1780 about the response to his action in the West Indies, lamenting “The world, too, is so busy, continually raising different reports of news from the West Indies, that really it both terrifies me, and wears my spirits to death.”

Shore wives had some consolation when widowed as they had the opportunity to receive a government pension. The success of so many naval officers during the mid-to-late eighteenth century led to many honors, including the granting of pensions, annuities,

191 Cumby, 318.
and other financial support, not only to the men, but also to their wives. Securing a pension for their wives was a concern for naval officers, especially those who came from families without property or other income. Wives of famous admirals were often awarded pensions either after their husbands’ death or during his life. Sarah Collingwood benefited from Admiral Collingwood’s heroic performance at Trafalgar by receiving a pension of £1000, to be paid on the Admiral’s death.  

Less fortunate or well-known captains also tried to secure a pension for their wives and children. While escorting an East India Company convoy home in 1781, Captain Thomas Pasley accepted a compliment from his Commodore G. Johnstone and took the opportunity to ask a favor. “I have then, Sir, to request (as we are all Mortal) that if I am cut off and you Survive, you will use your Interest to procure a Pension for Mrs. Pasley—that she may be enabled to support herself and children as becomes my Wife.” The commodore agreed and Pasley persuaded him to record the promise in a letter. In the end, Pasley did not die gloriously in battle, and was preceded in death by Mrs. Pasley. This episode illustrates that even though his ship was not preparing for battle, Pasley was thinking of his own mortality. He seized the opportunity to help provide for his “best beloved friend and companion, Mrs. Pasley.” The vigor with which Pasley pursued the pension for his wife illustrates the economic realities of widowhood. Without their husband’s income or a business or trade from which to draw an income, widows could easily slip into poverty. The pension offered by the navy, while certainly a safety net not

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194 Pasley, 242.
available to most widows, would stave off poverty but would lead to a reduced lifestyle. Pasley does not ask for the pension to save his wife from ruin, but so that she can continue to live “as becomes my Wife.” Government pensions were an excellent way to be able to maintain a certain status. This was definitely a perk of being the wife of a naval officer. Financial security in widowhood provided a measure of compensation for all of the fear, anxiety, and trepidation that the shore wives had to endure.

For those less fortunate (and less famous) officers who were unable to secure a lucrative government pension, the Admiralty granted pensions to widows using the charity *For Relief of Poor Widows of Commission and Warrant Officers of the Royal Navy*. This charity was headed by the Court of Assistants and was financed through regular contributions by serving commissioned and warrant officers. Details from Admiralty records clearly show that not all men married only after achieving the rank of post captain. Widows of midshipmen, lieutenants, and captains petitioned for, and were granted, pensions from this charity.\(^{195}\)

Documents from the Charity for the Payment of Pensions to the Widows of Sea Officers offer insight into the process poor widows had to go through in order to receive a pension. The papers illustrate that this process, while time consuming, was relatively straight-forward. A widow submitted a form attesting to her income level. [Figure G]

\(^{195}\) ADM 6/335
This was seemingly a sliding scale based on rank – a purser’s widow stated she had an annual income of less than twenty pounds and Ann Lynch, widow of a lieutenant, claimed to have an annual income of less than thirty pounds. This form was corroborated and signed by the widow and at least two other men, often naval officers or parish
officials. Widows also submitted proof (often a printed form filled in by church officials) of their marriage to the deceased officer, and “having never since been married to any other Person.” 196 [Figure H]

Figure H

The cases of Ann Cheyne and Elizabeth O’Hara are more complicated. Their cases required more work because they did not apply for the pension immediately after

196 ADM 6/335
their husband’s death. Elizabeth O’Hara did not apply until nearly seven years after her husband Peter’s death. It is easy to appreciate the difficulty in obtaining proof of service and payment toward the charity after a space of seven years, despite detailed Admiralty records. Admiralty documents reveal that there were some questions regarding Lieutenant O’Hara’s service, including records that show he was superceded, or replaced—the records suggest it was due to illness—from his ship in 1759, three years before his death, and there is no further record of employment. “Her agent,” the letter reads, “has been told of the above objection [being superceded], and that it was necessary it should be cleared up before she [Elizabeth O’Hara] could be placed on the List of Widows.”

O’Hara’s request was filed on 31 January, 1769, and by 14 March of that year, the Navy Office had confirmed that while a Lieutenant on the Revenge, Peter O’Hara “has paid the Three pence P[er] Pound, for the Benefit of the poor Widows of Sea Officers.” Yet the Navy Office had still not found where O’Hara was reinstated after leaving the Revenge in a follow-up document dated 19 April, 1769. A final petition submitted by Mrs. O’Hara in January 1770 resolved the situation and contained not so subtle hints about family connections. O’Hara, she claims, “on his recovery he went a Volunteer to Senegal, and was there reinstated in his Majesties Service . . . put into Command, by Governor Worge in the year 1761.” She closes her latest petition stating “It may not be improper to acquaint your Lordships that my Husband was Brother to . . . Charles O’Hara the present Governor of Senegal, and Capt. Francis O’Hara who was murdered on the

197 ADM 6/335
198 ADM 6/335
same coast.” This document also illustrates the far reaches of the British Empire in the late eighteenth century.

Ledgers showing the application for widow’s pensions from 1809–1820 disclose other anomalies. In the “Observances” column of the ledger are numerous accounts where pensions were granted despite strange circumstances. One sad case concerned Anna and Ellen Barnard, who both claimed to be the wife of Lieutenant Thomas Barnard. The Admiralty document revealed that although Ellen genuinely believed that she was the legitimate wife of Lt. Barnard, Anna was still married to him when he “married” Ellen. Anna Barnard received Lt. Barnard’s pension.

The Navy Office appears to have been diligent and even benevolent in their practice of granting pensions. One woman who seems to have been a victim of an unscrupulous agent was Alice Lucas. “Observations” on this case read, “The papers of this widow being dated at Swansea Yard . . . June 1807, tho’ not delivered until 1810, entitled her to the pension from June 1807, the month the application was dated.”

Frances Boscawen’s husband died at home at the age of 49. His health had declined over his long service at sea, so in September 1760, Admiral Boscawen retired. At first he seemed to recover, finally at home with Fanny. However, he developed a fever in early December of that year and died a few weeks later. Fanny, according to her friend Elizabeth Montagu, was “very anxious and unhappy about the Admiral, and indeed the loss to her and her children would be as great as possible.” After his death, the

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199 ADM 6/335
200 ADM 22/238
201 ADM 22/238
202 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 283-284.
203 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 284.
emotional Fanny pulled herself together for the sake of her children. Mrs. Montagu describes her as “very calm and settled; she endeavours all she can to bring herself to submit to this dire misfortune.” Fanny herself wrote Edward’s epitaph in which she described his accomplishments in his career and with his family. Fanny Boscawen would become famous, along with her friend Elizabeth Montagu, as the hostesses of ‘Blue-Stocking Assemblies.’ She devoted herself to her friends and family until the end of her life, in February 1805, forty-four years after her beloved husband.

Henrietta Rodney grew old with her husband, outliving him by only a few years. Even in the words of a most sympathetic biographer, Rodney’s son-in-law Major-General Cumby, Lord Rodney’s retirement years were not easy. Rodney’s financial problems seemed to have followed him as “no less multiplied than vexatious were the law-suits against which Lord Rodney had to defend himself in the last ten years of his life, by which his private fortune was greatly impaired.” Cumby brightly states that Rodney died “in an honourable poverty,” so more research is needed to understand how Henrietta was affected by the lack of financial security upon Rodney’s death. Presumably she received her pension, but it may have been used to help offset Rodney’s debts. Henrietta’s letters show her to be both loyal and resourceful, or in less flattering terms, an enabler. It may be informative to see how her colorful life ended.

Frances Nelson, still Nelson’s legal wife at the time of his death, received all of the legal benefits of that union from the Admiralty and Lloyd’s Patriotic Fund. The official notice of Nelson’s death at Trafalgar from the Admiralty was sent to her, not to

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204 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Wife, 285.
205 Aspinall-Oglander, Admiral’s Widow, 14, 13, 198.
206 Cumby, 366.
207 Cumby, 366.
Lady Hamilton. But this was small comfort. Nelson’s last thoughts were for Emma, her daughter, and their financial security. Nelson’s urging on his deathbed that the country take care of his dear Emma gave her even more public status. Nelson’s family shared in his glorious victory at Trafalgar, at least monetarily. His brother William inherited his earldom, a grant of £90,000 to purchase an estate, and £5,000 a year for him and his family from the government. The government also granted Nelson’s sisters £15,000. Frances’ legal status as wife allowed her to finally triumph over her rival Emma Hamilton. The government granted Lady Nelson a pension of £2,000, whereas Lady Hamilton, despite Nelson’s pleas, received nothing.

Nelson’s will, on the surface, seems favorable to Fanny. In 1803 the admiral revised his will, cutting Fanny and Josiah out of most of his money and property in favor of Lady Hamilton and other family members. To Fanny, he left a trust fund which would allow her £1000 a year and £4000 outright. However, the trust would become invalid if she were granted a pension of equal or higher value by the government. The £4000 was Fanny’s money from her uncle’s estate. Nelson apparently felt that that money should be given to her. Fanny’s government pension of £2000 triggered the invalidation, but she continued to fight for part of her annuity. She eventually sued the executors in Chancery court and won. Fanny was also awarded over £900 of Nelson’s Trafalgar prize money from the Bounty Bill. 

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208 Hardy, 287.
209 Knight, 518-519.
210 Southam, 232.
211 Southam, 111.
212 Hardy, 290-295.
213 Hardy, 291.
In addition to arguing over the money, Nelson’s family became increasingly petty over some of Nelson’s other possessions. Nelson left his awards and personal items to Emma Hamilton, family members, and friends, cutting Fanny off from potential mementoes. Nelson’s brother William (the new Earl Nelson) was willed a gold presentation box. Instead of inquiring himself as to its location, the Earl had the executors write to Fanny, politely demanding that she turn it over. The box was later found at Emma Hamilton’s house at Merton.²¹⁴

Frances Nelson’s widowhood was complicated by her husband’s affair with Emma Hamilton. While Fanny’s letters after hearing of her husband’s death were written on paper edged in black and her dressmaker’s bill shows she purchased widow’s weeds, the nation saw Emma as Nelson’s romantic widow.²¹⁵ Several factors, such as her in-laws’ estrangement from her as Nelson’s obsession with Lady Hamilton caused them to choose sides, made Fanny’s life as a widow even more difficult.²¹⁶

Despite the difficulties and personal pains, the widowed Lady Nelson enjoyed her later years. Financially secure because of a lavish pension and other monetary awards, she travelled and indulged her son and his family, as well as donating money annually to the fund for those injured at Trafalgar.²¹⁷ Although Josiah Nisbet named his first son Horatio, he later declared in his will that if his wife were to marry after his death, “the child or children shall be immediately removed by the trustees from . . . their said mother

²¹⁴ Hardy, 293.
²¹⁵ Hardy, 289, 292.
²¹⁶ Southam, 229.
²¹⁷ Hardy, 304.
and no longer permitted to reside with her.” Shelia Hardy takes this to be a damning of stepfathers.

Fanny’s last days were spent in Exmouth, where she lived after Nelson’s death and where she came to bury Josiah, who died in 1830. After her death a year later, the Nelson family took one last petty stab at the admiral’s widow. According to Sarah Hardy (wife of Admiral Thomas Hardy), Nelson’s sister “had come to the house [Fanny’s house] as soon as she heard of Lady Nelson’s death and had carried away two large porcelain vases representing Lord Nelson’s battles which had been given to Lady Nelson . . . and she had specially left them to her granddaughters.” The vases were apparently restored to their rightful owners, but the action reveals the true nature of the Nelson family.  

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218 Hardy, 307.
219 Hardy, 311-312.
Conclusion

Late-eighteenth-century shore wives had experiences and characteristics that differentiate them from other women of the time. For the shore wives, marriage was often a distant affair. While separated from their husbands, these women shouldered the burden of maintaining correspondence, participating in naval patronage networks, and navigating through the bureaucracy of the admiralty, personal agents, and their own husbands for financial information, all while receiving often tedious, sometimes terrifying letters from their spouses. These pressures were unique to the shore wives.

Shore wives often served as a haven in which eighteenth-century naval officers could share their true feelings. Some men maintained warm friendships with other men, often sharing hopes and fears. However, nothing compares to the openness with which most officers unburdened themselves to their wives. Any study of naval officers should examine closely the relationships they had with their spousal partners. The life of a naval commander was a lonely one. Captains were seen as omnipotent (or wished to be seen as such), but turned to their wives in moments of weakness or despair, knowing there would be no negative repercussions. Even Horatio Nelson, as cold and uncommunicative as he would later become, turned to Fanny in moments of self-pity or self-doubt. Captain Henry Blackwood confessed to his wife before Trafalgar “I have been dreaming all night of my carrying home despatches. God send so much good luck!”220 After the battle, he

shares his emotions with her, proclaiming “To any other person, my Harriet, but yourself, I could not and would not enter so much into the detail, particularly of what I feel at this moment.” Fanny Boscawen’s reaction to her husband’s confidence is reflected in this entry in her journal.

Thus I think aloud to you, my dearest friend and partner, and it is with great joy that I read in your last letter so kind an expression on your side as that you communicate to me your most secret thoughts on men and things. It always was my ambition to possess your confidence, for in so doing, I’m sure to possess your esteem.

As part of the naval family, officers’ wives became involved in the machinery of the admiralty. Their correspondence often went through official admiralty channels, wives appealed to the admiralty officials for patronage appointments, and admiralty charities serviced poor widows and orphans.

In the field of women’s history, the shore wives occupy a fascinating niche. They were politically active, though not vilified like the Duchess of Devonshire. They were non-widows who had financial freedoms and financial control. Most of them were not from political families, but they played the patronage game for the benefit of their husbands, family friends, and themselves. They were members of the gentry who were suddenly ennobled. They were ordinary women married to ordinary men who became extraordinary public figures. Their contribution to their husbands’ career and to the general well-being of their families by assuming roles outside the narrow realm of private stand as another argument against the practicality of “separate spheres” as a way of life instead of an ideology. Shore wives in the nineteenth century, when this ideology became reality in the view of some historians, must also have taken up these masculine duties.

221 Moorhouse (Meynall), 288.  
222 Aspinall-Oglander, 207.
The lack of rapid communication until the end of that century makes it an almost certainty.

The late eighteenth century gave rise to a militarism and nationalism that shaped the future of Britain. The shore wives rode the waves of public adulation as symbols of patriotism. Yet we know so little about their lives. This thesis only touches the surface of what is a vast amount of information regarding these women. Primary sources exist. Letters, diaries, account books, admiralty records, charity lists, and other documentation will shed light on a fascinating and colorful group of women.

The lives of late eighteenth-century Royal Naval officers’ wives are linked to many areas of historical study, including social history, naval history, women’s history, economic history, colonial history, local histories of towns such as Bath and Portsmouth, and political history. Dramatic historical events and ideals either took place or took root in the late eighteenth century. By connecting the lives of the shore wives to these events, this thesis provides a different perspective to such events as the British victory during the Seven Years’ War, the defeat of the British in the American Revolution, the patriotic movement of the late eighteenth century, the backlash against women in public during the Napoleonic Era, the Royal Navy’s anti-climactic participation toward the end of the Napoleonic Era in the face of the army’s many victories on the continent, the idea of “separate spheres”, and the movements to expand women’s education and legal rights.

The future of this research is to discover the lasting legacy of the shore wives. Their work, seen by them as their duty, proved that women were capable of accomplishing many tasks typically thought of as male duties. The work of the shore
wives has, perhaps unwittingly, been the catalyst for those who sought to expand the role and rights of women, from Mary Wollstonecraft, to the suffragettes, to the World War I munitions workers, to modern female sailors and modern shore wives.
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