

1 The infant ensign, 1793–1817

In late summer 1795, three oddly assorted travellers arrived at the house of Dr Charles Hutton, F.R.S., Professor of Mathematics at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. One of them was the Doctor's son, Henry, a captain in the Royal Artillery; the others, Captain Hutton's two-year-old nephew, and an Irish nursemaid. Together they had made the long journey across the Atlantic from the West Indian island of Guadeloupe.

This was the climax of a series of events which had begun five years before, when Dr Hutton's second daughter, Camilla, had married Captain Charles Henry Vignoles, of the 43rd Regiment of Foot. Vignoles was a descendant of a line of Huguenot soldiers serving in the British Army.¹ Shortly after the marriage, he joined his regiment in Ireland, and his wife went with him. During the various changes of lodging necessitated by the regiment's movements, the couple were invited to stay for a time by some friends of her husband, a Mr and Mrs Blacker, at their country house at Woodbrook, near Enniscorthy, County Wexford; and it was in the Blackers' house, on 31 May 1793, that Camilla gave birth to a son, who was christened Charles Blacker out of compliment to his parents' host and hostess.

The child was barely six months old when his father's regiment was ordered overseas. Britain's struggle with revolutionary France was just beginning, and a combined operation was to be launched against the French West Indian islands, from a base in Barbados. The 43rd embarked at Cork on 17 November and, as was by no means unusual in the eighteenth century, Captain Vignoles was accompanied on the seven weeks' voyage to the Caribbean by his wife and son. What such a journey must have involved, for a young mother nursing her firstborn child, is hard to imagine.

Presumably Camilla found lodgings in Barbados, and remained there while the campaign against the French islands proceeded. At first all went well. Martinique and St Louis were taken, not without heavy fighting, and some time after the fall of Guadeloupe, in April 1794, the Vignoles family were reunited in the town of Pointe-à-Pitre, capital of the island. But here disaster struck them. Yellow fever, the scourge of all such campaigns, had broken out among the troops and seamen. The British forces, depleted even more by sickness than by their battle casualties, were unable to resist an unexpected attack by a force newly arrived from France. Pointe-à-Pitre was captured by the French revolutionary troops and Captain Vignoles, wounded and suffering from yellow fever, took refuge with

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his wife and son in the house of a friendly French merchant called Courtois.

In spite of all that M. Courtois and Camilla could do for him he died on 8 June. His wife, also suffering from the fever, and exhausted by the strain of nursing her husband, died two days later. In a letter to Dr Hutton, M. Courtois tells how Camilla, who wished to write to her father and brother before she died, 'asked for ink and paper, but her strength failed, and she could do no more than leave us their address . . . she ended by confiding to my care her child Charles, then thirteen months old, who was already so ill that he seemed unlikely to survive her long. I promised to take care of him until the coming of peace would allow me to return him to his family.'

M. Courtois was as good as his word. The baby was nursed back to health, and a message was somehow conveyed to Camilla's brother Henry, then serving with the artillery in Grenada. Having obtained per-

Captain Charles Henry Vignoles, c. 1790, from a miniature by an unknown artist.



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mission to go to Guadeloupe in search of his nephew (his intention was to pass through the French lines under a flag of truce), he joined the remnants of the British forces holding out in the island. An action ensued, in which Captain Hutton was wounded in the eye and taken as a prisoner to Pointe-à-Pitre, where he was not only able to locate his nephew, but managed to persuade the French commander to release him on parole, so that he could return to Grenada with the child and his nursemaid, and thence to England.² Meanwhile, in response to an application from Captain Hutton, the British Commander-in-Chief in the West Indies had appointed the infant Vignoles to the rank of Ensign in his late father's regiment, on condition that 'he shall exchange to half-pay immediately, being too young to serve'.

The suggestion in the *Dictionary of National Biography* that the commission was bestowed on Charles in order that he might be exchanged for a French prisoner of war, is not supported by a close examination of the evidence. Olinthus Vignoles, on whose biography of his father the Dictionary largely draws, while mentioning the condition of Captain Hutton's exchange, merely points out that the grant of a half-pay commission to an infant was a means by which the War Office sometimes compensated a deceased officer's family. Romantic as the Dictionary's suggestion is, it must be discounted.

The family to which the infant ensign had been so miraculously conveyed consisted of Dr Hutton, Margaret, his second wife, and his eldest

Isabella and
Camilla,
daughters of Dr
Charles Hutton,
1788. Oil painting
by Philip
Reinagle.



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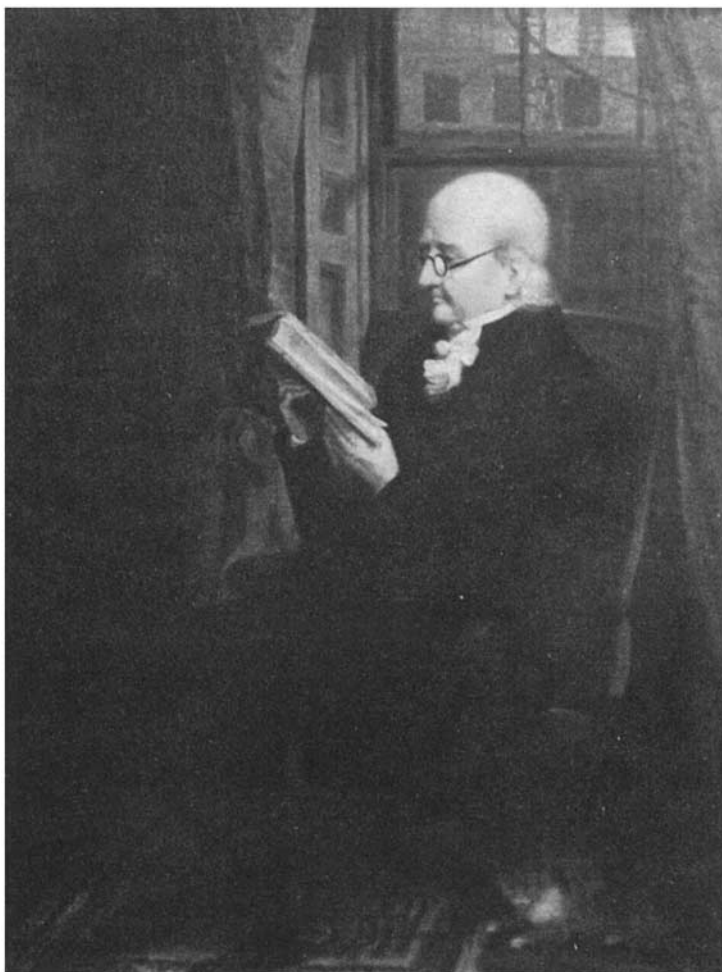
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daughter Isabella, then in her thirty-third year. The son, Henry, we have already met. A third daughter had already married and left home, while another had died the previous year at the age of 16, about the same time as the tragic news from Guadeloupe reached Woolwich. It had been reported that young Charles had perished with his parents;³ so that his unexpected restoration must have seemed to the Huttons like a heaven-sent consolation for the loss of his mother and aunt. Small wonder that the two ladies took him to their hearts. As for the Doctor, there is no doubt that Captain Hutton was carrying out his sister's wishes in delivering the child to him, and he readily accepted full responsibility for his upbringing.

Dr Charles Hutton, at 58 years of age, was at the height of his powers as Professor of Mathematics at the Royal Military Academy. For 20 years he had been a Fellow of the Royal Society; he was an authority on ballistics, gunnery and the theory of explosives; he had calculated the mean density of the earth from the data provided by Maskelyne's experiments on Mount Schiehallion, and he was the author of numerous works on

Dr Charles Hutton F.R.S., aged 85 years, in his house at 34 Bedford Row, 1822. Oil painting attributed to Philip Reinagle.



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mathematics. The son of a Newcastle colliery official, he had worked as a boy in the mine; but when an accident made him unfit to hew coal he was sent to the village school, where his considerable mathematical ability brought him to a career of teaching. At 23 he had founded his own mathematical school at Newcastle, and only 13 years later he was appointed Professor at Woolwich. Nor was this all. In 1772 he had published a book on the principles of bridges, after the Newcastle bridge had collapsed in a flood; and he had been commissioned by the city authorities to survey and map the city and its suburbs. At Woolwich he had designed and built 18 houses on a piece of ground he had bought on the wind-swept slopes of Shooter's Hill. In one of these houses he made his home.⁴

Apart from a couple of brief references in family correspondence, the little we know of Charles's childhood is based on some passages in letters he wrote in 1814 to his future wife. These tell us that from an early age he enjoyed the advantages of his grandfather's skill as a teacher. He was well grounded in mathematics, classics and modern languages, and the Doctor gave him the run of his well-stocked library. Here Charles read widely and voraciously, preferring literature to books on science, and on his own admission he spent more time browsing and dreaming in the library than at more methodical studies. Such an attitude could hardly have been approved by his grandfather, who was noted for his undeviating regularity in the distribution of his time, and, though generally of a mild and equable temper, was a man of authority in every sense of the word. But it is probable that Charles found sympathetic support from the ladies, and that they encouraged his undoubted artistic talents, and showed understanding for a clever boy's natural aversion to drudgery.

From his reading Charles confessed that he remembered the ornamental rather than the useful; but his close acquaintance with the classics, Shakespeare and the literature of the eighteenth century, and his knowledge of languages, taught him to write in a style which, though not uninfluenced by the fashionable verbosity of the age, yet displayed wit, imagination and a feeling for good English. Having the example of his grandfather's skill as a draftsman, his forte was in mechanical rather than freehand drawing, though he seems to have shown promise in sketching and painting. Add to all this a well-trained singing voice and a practical knowledge and appreciation of music, and the picture emerges of a cultivated and intelligent young man, typical of his age, whose upbringing had bred in him a considerable independence of spirit.

Before Charles completed his education, Dr Hutton retired from the Academy, and the family moved to London. The new home was at number 34 Bedford Row, a quiet street whose pleasant eighteenth-century houses still face one another within a stone's throw of Gray's Inn. The move to Bloomsbury put the Doctor within easy reach of his wide circle of scientific and literary acquaintances, and of many army officers (including some of the highest rank) whose friendship he enjoyed through his long association with the Academy.

For the youthful Charles, halfway between boy and man, the change meant a considerable widening of horizons. It was not long before he was

taking part in social evenings at Bedford Row and in the other Bloomsbury houses of his grandfather's friends. Poetry readings and music, lectures and discussions on scientific subjects, were the main features of these gatherings; and it was here that he first began to be aware of the charms of the opposite sex, with whom he sharpened his wits in argument, and tried his hand at writing acrostics and love verses.

As Charles grew to manhood he continued to work at mathematics with his grandfather, assisting him with the computation of a set of logarithmic tables. Although his grandson was still an ensign on half-pay, and the army was deeply involved in a continental war, the Doctor had no intention of allowing Charles to take up a full commission. Instead, he proposed he should enter the law. Charles was accordingly articled to a proctor in Doctors' Commons. He seems to have accepted this, though how willingly we do not know. It is possible that Dr Hutton regretted having allowed his daughter to marry a penniless officer, and that he wished to make amends for this, and for her untimely death, by ensuring a more secure life for her son. Peace must come ere long, and after 30 years at the Academy he had no illusions about the prospects of peacetime soldiering without influential support and considerable private means. So he probably decided that such money as he was prepared to bestow on his daughter's son would be better invested in a legal training than in an uncertain military career.

We do not know how long Charles stayed in Doctors' Commons, but the mental discipline of this legal training, and the knowledge of the law he acquired there, were to be of great value to him in his professional life. Meanwhile the delights of the social gatherings in Bedford Row were some compensation for the drudgery of a lawyer's office. To these Charles contributed his share of 'poetic effusions', of which two survive: *The Sylphiad*, a leather-bound manuscript poem in eight cantos, written in elegiac couplets, and owing more than its inspiration to Pope; and a shorter heroic ode, entered for a competition held in August 1812 for a poem to be read at the re-opening of Drury Lane Theatre, rebuilt after a disastrous fire. The ode is preserved in the British Library, bound up with the hundred or so other unsuccessful entries (with many of which it compared favourably) under the title of *Rejected Addresses*.⁵ (The poem actually spoken at the re-opening was written by Byron, who had not even deigned to enter the competition.)

About the middle of 1813, when Charles was just 20 years old, this idyllic phase of his life came to an abrupt end. He quarrelled violently with his grandfather, and was banished from the house. What exactly happened is wrapped in mystery; but the result was a rift between grandfather and grandson that had an influence on the whole course of the latter's life. According to Charles's account, he was engaged in a clandestine love affair, and had for the first time in his life run into debt (it was by no means to be the last), 'when the thunderbolt burst over my head and I left home'. In later years Mrs Hutton told Charles that the Doctor could never forgive him for 'going from the law business'. It seems probable, therefore, that Charles was beginning to tire of the law, and when taxed

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with his misdemeanours was unwise enough to tell his grandfather so, and to declare he wished to follow the Vignoles profession of arms; and that the Doctor, furious at having his plans thwarted (and incidentally at having laid out a large sum of money to no purpose) broke with him irrevocably. A reason for the break can also be found in the fundamental incompatibility between the Hutton and Vignoles temperaments. North country prudence, industry and hard-headed economy accorded ill with the more volatile and easy-going ways of the Huguenot character. In Charles the two opposing strains had met, to become a source of strength as well as weakness. His success would depend on which of the strains had the upper hand. In his grandfather's eyes the improvident strain had already taken over; what he could not foresee was that the breach would be made the more difficult to heal because of the very traits inherited by Charles from himself.

Yet the Doctor did not cut Charles off altogether. At the end of September 1813 we find him living at Sandhurst as a private pupil of Professor Thomas Leybourn, a teacher of mathematics at the Royal Military College. It seemed that Dr Hutton had consented to his grandson's wishes to the extent of putting him in Mr Leybourn's charge, with the injunction that he should do what was necessary to prepare him for the army and procure him a commission. There is no record of his ever having been a pupil at the College, although he mixed with the cadets, and he mentions having been drilled by the Regimental Sergeant-Major. As the holder of a half-pay commission, of more than 18 years' seniority, he had no need to go through the formality of purchasing a commission. It was merely a question of obtaining the favour of a senior officer willing to accept him in his regiment. Dr Hutton hoped that this might be effected by an application to the Duke of Kent, on whose staff Charles's father had served during the West Indian campaign. Meanwhile Mr Leybourn would see that Charles was kept out of further trouble.

What happened between the break with Dr Hutton and Charles's establishment at Sandhurst? There is a gap in the record here which one would dearly like to fill. Olinthus Vignoles refers to a tradition that his father joined the army in Spain and was present at the battle of Vitoria, and he goes on so far as to state that in later life Charles often spoke of an early visit to Spain. The story was sufficiently well-known for it to be referred to in a speech made by a distinguished Member of Parliament, when proposing Vignoles's health at the 1870 annual dinner of the Institution of Civil Engineers; and it is mentioned in various forms in the many obituary notices published in December 1875, most of which fasten on the picturesque circumstance that the young campaigner who 'threaded the passes of the Pyrenees' after the battle of Vitoria used this experience in later life when building a railway in the same area. But it is a fact that Olinthus Vignoles wrote at least one of these notices, and probable that he supplied material for the rest, many of which present a very garbled version of other incidents in Charles's life.

What is certain is that while the veteran engineer does not seem to have contradicted the statement made at the Institution dinner (which in any

case he could hardly have done without discourtesy and some loss of face), yet the young soldier, in letters written to his fiancée much nearer the time, made no reference, direct or oblique, to an experience so recent and of such an adventurous nature. Such reticence is scarcely in character. Nor is there any trace of the story in any other family letters.⁶ Furthermore, if Charles had in fact been with Wellington's army in the Peninsula would he have told his fiancée, in writing on the assault of Bergen-op-Zoom in March 1814, that it was there that he was first injured to fire? And is it likely that a young man who had already seen active service overseas would have submitted to the restraints put upon him under the tutelage of Mr Leybourn? In spite of all this the tradition is a persistent one.

However uncertain we may be about this particular episode, with Charles's arrival at Sandhurst we enter one of the best-documented periods of his life. For it was under Mr Leybourn's roof that he met Mary Griffiths, to whom he was to be secretly engaged for four years before finally marrying her, and with whom he was to carry on a long and intimate correspondence. She was the eldest daughter of a Welsh gentleman-farmer, after whose death she had set up as a milliner in London, with her two younger sisters in her care. Mr Leybourn was her guardian and trustee.

Charles, by his own account, was still smarting at the humiliation of having been banished from home and put in Mr Leybourn's charge as an unreliable good-for-nothing. The sympathy of an attractive young woman was just what he needed. On Mary's side, the warning that her guardian seems to have given her about the handsome and gifted young man's dangerous character, far from discouraging her, aroused her interest. She was six years older than Charles, and her strong maternal instinct persuaded her that he was a brand to be plucked from the burning. In his susceptible state, Charles was ready to be saved, while Mary's innate prudence proved of no avail against the penitent's undoubted charm. By the time she had to return to London, at the end of September, they were secretly engaged to be married.

There was need for secrecy, for Dr Hutton would hardly have approved such a match for his grandson, and Mr Leybourn must perforce have been of the same opinion. In any case, without a reconciliation with his grandfather, Charles could not hope to enjoy the 'competence' necessary for a stable marriage; he had still to be established in the army, and even then, without some private means, he could hardly hope to maintain his wife in the state they both would have wished. The prospects for the marriage were bleak. The lovers were separated as soon as they were engaged, and their meetings for the next four years were to be few and far between. In the circumstances it was remarkable that Charles, who had such a reputation for unreliability, should have remained faithful for so long.

Their correspondence was carried on in an emotional and highly romantic style, spiced with the excitement and alarms arising from the need for secrecy. Charles and Mary were true children of their age. Pro-

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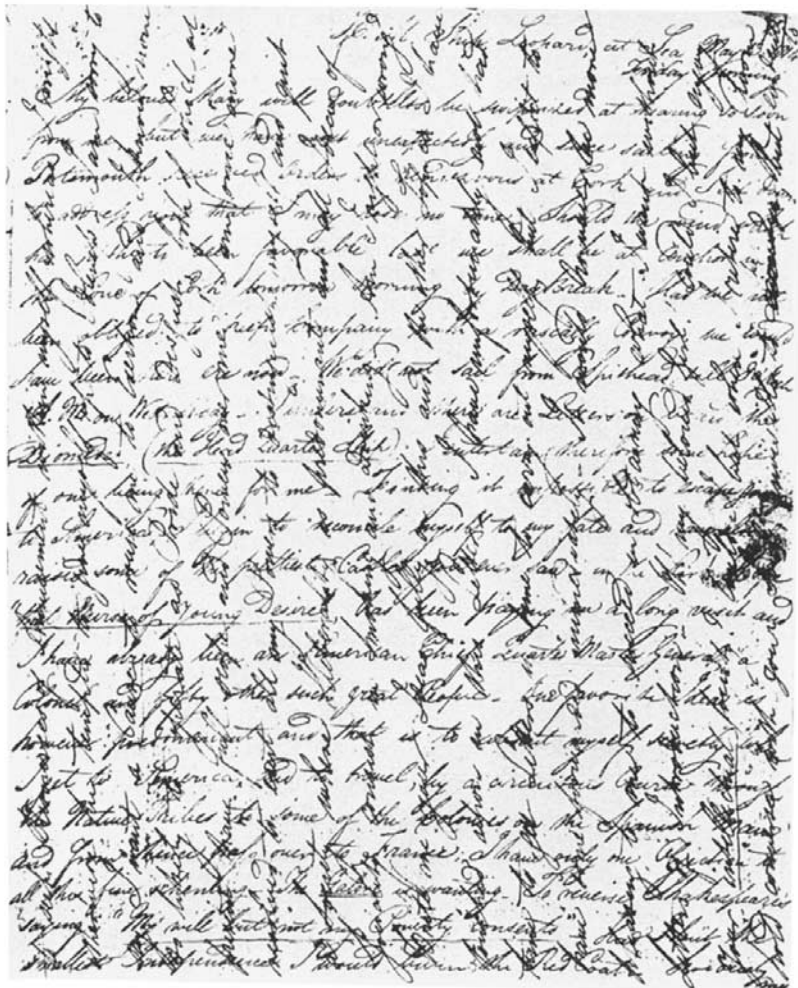
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testations of love, confessions, misunderstandings, quarrels and reconciliations, all the ingredients of the romantic novel of the eighteenth century, are to be found in these letters. They present a remarkable picture of the daily life and character of the writers. They also reveal only too clearly the incompatibility of temperament which was ultimately to wreck their marriage. Charles and Mary were not the first couple to find the realities of married life somewhat different from the romantic dreams of courtship, especially when extended over a long period of separation.

The promised interview with the Duke of Kent took place, and after some weeks, during which Charles pined for Mary in the country around Sandhurst, 'rambling through every walk where we strolled together, and resting on every Style and Gate which supported us both', he was commissioned to the York Chasseurs, situated in the Isle of Wight. There, after trudging for a month through heavy snow on outpost duty at Sandown, he obtained a transfer to the 1st Royals (the Royal Scots) and was ordered to join the 4th Battalion in Holland, where a British force was

Letter from Charles Vignoles to Mary Griffiths, 13 May 1814, written on board H.M.S. *Leopard*, off Cork. A good example of a 'crossed-over' letter.



to reinforce a Dutch rebellion against Napoleon. At this point he must have done some hard thinking about his prospects as an infantry officer, for on arrival at the army base at Willemstadt, he applied for a post on the staff as assistant engineer. For this he confidently quoted as his qualification an 'engineering education', and a knowledge of French, German and grammatical Dutch, of which he knew enough 'to be sure he would soon be able to converse in it'. With equal confidence he tackled the job of making a plan of the town and fortress, which was required to support his application. 'Here was a task for me,' he wrote to Mary, 'who (between ourselves) knew nothing of affairs of that kind and was unfurnished with a single Instrument or Book to assist me. That, however, did not deter me.' In five days, with pencil, paper and his feet as measures, he had taken the dimensions of the ramparts and town and made a plan with the help of a pair of old compasses.

This achievement, and the information that he had learned his engineering from Dr Hutton, secured him the post; but when the appointment was confirmed in General Orders his commanding officer refused him permission to leave the regiment.

Next day, on the night of 8 March 1814, the Royals took part in the disastrous attack on the fortified town of Bergen-op-Zoom. Charles wrote to Mary a long account of the action, which included a vivid description of the abortive attempts to force the town after the troops had struggled across the River Zoom, waist deep in icy mud, and of the surrender of the British after a night of skirmishes and unsuccessful attacks. Charles had his cheek grazed by a musket-ball when leading a bayonet charge, and according to his account was the officer deputed to negotiate the terms of surrender for the battalion, carrying a white handkerchief (his own) tied on top of a halbert.

It was in this action, as we have already mentioned, that he told Mary that he was first 'broken in to stand fire'. The events of that dreadful night made a deep impression on him. He describes the guard-house in which the wounded found temporary shelter during the action:

The fire shone feebly on the ghastly countenances of the Men nearest to it. Their Cheeks streaked with Blood, the Eyes convulsed and every feature around distorted with Pain and Agony. In the background the Figures were scarcely discernible through the Smoke. The whole formed a scene that made my Heart sicken within me. No Pen could describe it, no Pencil do it justice.⁷

The terms of surrender provided for the regiment's return to England as soon as the ice-bound river was navigable, on condition that officers and men should not fight again against the French until exchanged for an equivalent number of French prisoners. While waiting to embark, Charles temporarily secured his staff job as assistant engineer, in the drawing department of the army headquarters at Breyda. Here he was 'living like a prince, with three horses and two servants in a magnificent billet – easy in mind and fat in body'. He planned to send Mary a consignment of lace and linen packed in a cask as 'damaged ammunition'.

On 4 April, with Napoleon's abdication, the war in Europe was virtu-