

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01870-8 - The Naval Chronicle, Volume 31

Edited by James Stanier Clarke and John McArthur

Excerpt

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BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR
OF
ADMIRAL ROBERT BLAKE.*

————— “ Thy name
Was heard in thunder through the affrighted shores
Of pale Iberia, of submissive Gaul,
And Tagus trembling to his utmost source.
O! ever faithful, vigilant, and brave,
Thou bold asserter of Britannia's fame,
Unconquerable Blake.”—————GLOVER.

AT a time when the nation is engaged in a war with an enemy, whose insults, ravages, and barbarities, have long called for vengeance, an account of such English commanders as have merited the acknowledgments of posterity, by extending the power, and raising the honour of their country, seems to be no improper entertainment for our readers. We shall, therefore, attempt a succinct narration of the life and actions of Admiral Blake; in which we have nothing farther in view, than to do justice to his bravery and conduct, without intending any parallel between his achievements and those of our present admirals.

Robert Blake was born at Bridgwater, in Somersetshire, in August, 1598, his father being a merchant of that place, who had acquired a considerable fortune by the Spanish trade. Of his earliest years we have no account,† and therefore can amuse the reader with none of those prognostics of his future actions, so often met with in memoirs.

In 1615 he entered into the University of Oxford, where he continued till 1623, though without being much countenanced or caressed by his superiors, for he was more than once disappointed in his endeavours after academical preferments. It is observable, that Mr. Wood (in his *Athenæ Oxonienses*) ascribes the repulse he met with at Wadham College, where he was competitor for a

* This memoir was an early production of Dr. Johnson's. The Editor has appended some Notes, which he conceived to be illustrative of the subject.

† He was educated at the free grammar-school in Bridgwater.

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fellowship, either to want of learning, or of stature. With regard to the first objection, the same writer had before informed us, that he was an early riser, and studious, though he sometimes relieved his attention by the amusements of fowling and fishing. As it is highly probable that he did not want capacity,* we may therefore conclude, upon this confession of his diligence, that he could not fail of being learned, at least in the degree requisite to the enjoyment of a fellowship; and may safely ascribe his disappointment to his want of stature; it being the custom of Sir Henry Savil, then warden of that College, to pay much regard to the outward appearance of those who solicited preferment in that Society. So much do the greatest events owe sometimes to accident or folly!

He afterwards retired to his native place, where he lived (says Clarendon) without any appearance of ambition to be a greater man than he was, but inveighed with great freedom against the licence of the times, and power of the court.

In 1640 he was chosen burgess for Bridgwater, by the Puritan party, to whom he had recommended himself by his disapprobation of Bishop Laud's violence and severity, and his non-compliance with those new ceremonies which he was then endeavouring to introduce.

When the civil war broke out, Blake, in conformity with his avowed principles, declared for the Parliament; and, thinking the bare declaration of right not all the duty of a good man, raised a troop of dragoons for his party, and appeared in the field with so much bravery, that he was in a short time advanced, without meeting any of those obstructions which he had encountered in the University.

In 1645 he was governor of Taunton, when the Lord Goring came before it with an army of 10,000 men. The town was ill fortified, and unsupplied with almost every thing necessary for supporting a siege. The state of this garrison encouraged Colonel Windham, who was acquainted with Blake, to propose a capitulation; which was rejected by Blake with indignation and

* He had taken the degree of B. A. Feb. 10, 1617; and, in 1623, wrote a copy of verses on the death of Camden.

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contempt: * nor were either menaces or persuasions of any effect; for he maintained the place, under all its disadvantages, till the siege was raised by the Parliament's army.

He continued, on many other occasions, to give proofs of an insuperable courage, and a steadiness of resolution not to be shaken; and, as a proof of his firm adherence to the Parliament, joined with the borough of Taunton in returning thanks for their resolution to make no more addresses to the King. Yet was he so far from approving the death of Charles I. that he made no scruple of declaring, that he would venture his life to save him, as willingly as he had done to serve the Parliament.

In February, 1648-9, he was made a commissioner of the navy, and appointed to serve on that element, for which he seems by nature to have been designed. He was soon afterwards sent in pursuit of Prince Rupert, whom he shut up in the harbour of Kingsale, in Ireland, for several months, till want of provisions, and despair of relief, excited the Prince to make a daring effort for his escape, by forcing through the Parliament's fleet: this design he executed with his usual intrepidity, and succeeded in it, though with the loss of three ships. He was pursued by Blake to the coast of Portugal,§ where he was received into the Tagus, and treated with great distinction by the Portuguese.

Blake coming to the mouth of that river, sent to the King a messenger to inform him, that the fleet in his port belonging to the public enemies of the Commonwealth of England, he demanded leave to fall upon it. This being refused, though the refusal was

* The answer of Blake was this: "These are to let you know, that as we neither fear your menaces, nor accept your proffers, so we wish you for time to come to desist from all overtures of the like nature to us, who are resolved to the last drop of our blood to maintain the quarrel we have undertaken; and doubt not but the same God, who has hitherto protected us, will, ere long, bless us with an issue answerable to the justice of our cause: however, to him alone we shall stand or fall.

For this service the Parliament ordered the garrison a bounty of 2,000*l.* and the governor a present of 500*l.*

This, however, has been imputed to the humanity of his temper: for after the death of the King, he entered into all the measures of the Republican party; and, indeed, next to Cromwell, was the ablest and most successful officer the Parliament had.

§ A map of Portugal will be found in our XXIVth Volume.

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in very soft terms, and accompanied with declarations of esteem, and a present of provisions, so exasperated the admiral, that, without any hesitation, he fell upon the Portuguese fleet, then returning from Brazil, of which he took 17 ships, and burnt three. It was to no purpose that the King of Portugal, alarmed at so unexpected a destruction, ordered Prince Rupert to attack him, and retake the Brazil ships. Blake carried home his prizes without molestation, the Prince not having force enough to pursue him, and well pleased with the opportunity of quitting a port where he could no longer be protected.

Blake soon supplied his fleet with provisions, and received orders to make reprisals upon the French, who had suffered their privateers to molest the English trade; an injury which, in those days, was always immediately resented, and, if not repaired, certainly punished. Sailing with this commission, he took in his way a French man of war, valued at a million. How this ship happened to be so rich, we are not informed; but, as it was a cruiser, it is probable the rich lading was the accumulated plunder of many prizes. Then following the unfortunate Rupert, whose fleet, by storms and battles, was now reduced to five ships, into Carthage, he demanded leave of the Spanish governor to attack him in the harbour, but received the same answer which had been returned before by the Portuguese; that they had a right to protect all ships that came into their dominions; that if the admiral were forced in thither, he should find the same security, and that he required him not to violate the peace of a neutral port. Blake withdrew upon this answer into the Mediterranean, and Rupert then leaving Carthage entered the port of Malaga, where he burnt and sunk several English merchant ships. Blake, judging this to be an infringement of the neutrality professed by the Spaniards, now made no scruple to fall upon Rupert's fleet in the harbour of Malaga, and having destroyed three of his ships, obliged him to quit the sea, and take sanctuary at the Spanish court.

In February, 1650-1, Blake, still continuing to cruise in the Mediterranean, met with a French ship of considerable force, and commanded the captain to come on board, there being no war declared between the two nations. The captain, when he came, was asked by him, whether he was willing to lay down his sword, and yield; which he gallantly refused, though in his

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enemy's power : Blake, scorning to take advantage of an artifice, and detesting the appearance of treachery, told him, that he was at liberty to go back to his ship, and defend it as long as he could. The captain willingly accepted his offer, and after a fight of two hours, confessed himself conquered, kissed his sword, and surrendered it.*

In 1652 broke out the memorable war between the two commonwealths of England and Holland ; a war, in which the greatest admirals that perhaps any age has produced, were engaged on each side ; in which nothing less was contested than the dominion of the sea, and which was carried on with vigour, animosity, and resolution proportioned to the importance of the dispute. The chief commanders of the Dutch fleets were, Van Trump, De Ruyter, and De Witt, the most celebrated names of their own nation, and who had been perhaps more renowned, had they been opposed by any other enemies. The States of Holland having carried on their trade without opposition, and almost without competition, not only during the unactive reign of James I. but during the commotions of England, had arrived to that height of naval power, and that affluence of wealth, that, with the arrogance which a long-continued prosperity naturally produces, they began to invent new claims, and to treat other nations with insolence, which nothing can defend but superiority of force. They had for some time made uncommon preparations at a vast expence, and had equipped a large fleet, without any apparent danger threatening them, or any avowed design of attacking their neighbours. This unusual armament was not beheld by the English without some jealousy, and care was taken to fit out such a fleet, as might secure the trade from interruption, and the coasts from insults ; of this Blake was constituted admiral for nine months. In this situation the two nations remained, keeping a watchful eye upon each other, without acting hostilities on either side, till the 18th of May, 1652, when Van Trump appeared in the Downs with a fleet of 45 men of war. Blake, who had then but 20 ships, upon the approach of the Dutch admiral, saluted him with three single

* This ship, with his four other prizes, he sent to England, and soon afterwards came with his squadron to Plymouth ; when he received the thanks of Parliament, and was made Warden of the Cinque Ports.

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shots, to require that he should, by striking his flag, shew that respect to the English, which is due to every nation in their own dominions: to which the Dutchman answered with a broadside; and Blake, perceiving that he intended to dispute the point of honour, advanced with his own ship before the rest of his fleet, that, if it were possible, a general battle might be prevented. But the Dutch, instead of admitting him to treat, fired upon him from their whole fleet, without any regard to the customs of war, or the law of nations.* Blake for some time stood alone against their whole force, till the rest of his squadron coming up, the fight was continued from between four and five in the afternoon till nine at night; when the Dutch retired with the loss of two ships, having not destroyed a single vessel, nor more than fifteen men, most of which were on board the admiral, who, as he wrote to the Parliament, was himself engaged for four hours with the main body of the Dutch fleet, being the mark at which they aimed; and, as Whitlock relates, received above a thousand shot. Blake in his letter acknowledges the particular blessing and preservation of God, and ascribes his success to the justice of his cause, the Dutch having first attacked him upon the English coast. It is, indeed, little less than miraculous, that a thousand great shot should not do more execution, and those who will not admit the interposition of Providence, may draw at least this inference from it, that the bravest man is not always in the greatest danger.

* The admiral was in his cabin drinking with some of his officers, little expecting to be so saluted; when the shot broke the windows of his ship, and shattered the stern, which put him into a vehement passion; and curling his whiskers, as he used to do when he was angry, he commanded his men to answer the Dutch in their kind; saying, when his heat was somewhat over, *he took it very ill of Van Trump, that he should take his ship for a bawdy house, and break his windows.*

Of this very remarkable action a narrative was printed by order of the Parliament of England, from which we give the following extract:—

“ Upon Tuesday the 18th of May, 1652, in the morning, General Blake being gone to the westward as far as Rye Bay, eight days before, with twelve or thirteen ships, leaving Major Bourne in the Downs, with eight ships only, there appeared upon the back-side of the Godwin a Holland fleet of men of war, consisting of two-and-forty ships, one whereof had a flag on the main-top-mast head, the rest jacks and ancients; and being come to the South Sand’s head, two of them bore up towards the English ships in the Downs; whereupon Major Bourne sent out the Greyhound to

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In July he met the Dutch Fishery fleet, with a convoy of twelve men of war, all which he took, with 100 of their herring-busses. And in September, being stationed in the Downs with about 60 sail, he discovered the Dutch admirals, De Witt and De Ruyter,

examine them, and to know the reason of their so near approach ; who answering, that they had a message to the commander-in-chief in the Downs, were permitted to come in ; and having saluted the flag, the two captains, named Tyson and Aldred, came aboard Major Bourne, and acquainted him that they were sent by Van Trump, to let him know that he had been riding about Dunkirk with his fleet, where, by reason of foul weather, they had lost many of their cables and anchors, and the wind being northerly, were driven farther to the southward than they intended, which Van Trump thought fit to signify, to prevent any misapprehensions or jealousies. And having said this, and received for answer, that the reality of what they said would best appear by their speedy drawing off from this coast, they departed to their fleet, and immediately, upon their arrival with them, the whole fleet stood up to Dover, and came to an anchor within little more than gun-shot of the castle, the same day in the afternoon. Upon their coming before Dover Castle, and riding there with a flag in the main-top, without saluting the Castle, the Castle made three shot at them ; notwithstanding which, the Dutch admiral kept up his flag, and rode there at anchor until the next day at noon, and exercised his musketeers, by discharging volleys of small shot many hours together. Upon Wednesday, about twelve o'clock, the Dutch fleet weighed anchor, and stood off towards Calais some few leagues unto the south-east. About the same time the English fleet, under General Blake, coming from the west towards the Downs, discovered them, and supposed by their course that they had been going back. Major Bourne likewise was in sight, coming from the Downs to join with General Blake. About an hour or two after, the Holland fleet altered their course, came back again, made all the sail they could, and bore directly with General Blake. Van Trump, the headmost, with his flag in the main-top, and being come within shot, the general shot a gun at his main-top, and then two single shot more ; whereupon Trump shot a single shot through the general's flag, and then immediately gave the first broadside, and took in his pendants, and hung out his red flag under the Holland colours, which was the signal on their part for the whole fleet to engage ; and so the fight began, which happened between four and five o'clock in the afternoon, and continued until nine o'clock. In the fight the English took two of the Holland fleet ; one whereof, having six foot water in the hold, they left, taking the captain and officers aboard : the other was a ship of thirty guns. General Blake lay all night where the fight began, or near thereabouts ; and the Holland fleet was espied about four leagues distant towards the coast of France next morning."

To this let us subjoin the letter written by the admiral himself, on account not only of several curious circumstances contained therein, but

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with near the same number, and advanced towards them; but the Dutch, being obliged by the nature of their coast, and shallowness

also because it may serve as a specimen of the plain blunt temper of this illustrious Hero. It was addressed to the Right Honourable William Lenthall, Esq. Speaker of the House of Commons, and conceived in the following terms :—

“ RIGHT HONOURABLE,

“ I have despatched away this express to your Honours, to give you an account of what passed yesterday between us and the Dutch fleet. Being in Rye Bay, I received intelligence from Major Bourn, that Van Trump, with forty sail, was off the South Sand Head; whereupon I made all possible speed to ply up towards them, and yesterday in the morning we saw them at anchor in and near Dover road. Being come within three leagues of them, they weighed, and stood away by a wind to the eastward; we supposing their intention was to leave us, to avoid the dispute of the flag. About two hours after they altered their course, and bore directly with us, Van Trump the headmost; whereupon we lay by, and put ourselves into a fighting posture, judging they had a resolution to engage. Being come within musket-shot, I gave order to fire at his flag, which was done thrice after the third shot he let fly a broadside at us. Major Bourn, with those ships that came from the Downs, being eight, was then making towards us. We continued fighting till night; then our ship being unable to sail, by reason that all our rigging and sails were extremely shattered, our mizen-mast shot off, we came, with advice of the captains, to an anchor, about three or four leagues off the Ness, to refit our ship, at which we laboured all the night. This morning we espied the Dutch fleet about four leagues distance from ours, towards the coast of France; and, by advice of a council of war it was resolved to ply to windward to keep the weather-gage, and we are now ready to let fall our anchors this tide. What course the Dutch fleet steers we do not well know, nor can we tell what harm we have done them; but we suppose one of them to be sunk, and another, of thirty guns we have taken, with the captains of both; the main-mast of the first being shot by the board, and much water in the hold, made Captain Lawson’s men to forsake her. We have six men of ours slain, and nine or ten desperately wounded, and twenty-five more not without danger; amongst them our master and one of his mates, and other officers. We have received about seventy great shot in our hull and masts, in our sails and rigging without number, being engaged with the whole body of the fleet for the space of four hours; being the mark at which they aimed. We must needs acknowledge it a great mercy that we had no more harm; and our hope is, the righteous God will continue the same unto us, if there do arise a war between us, they being first in the breach, and seeking an occasion to quarrel, and watching as it seems an advantage to brave us upon our own coast, &c.

Your humble servant,

“ *From aboard the James, three leagues off the Hyde, the 20th of May, 1652.*”

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of their rivers, to build their ships in such a manner that they require less depth of water than the English vessels, took advantage of the form of their shipping, and sheltered themselves behind a Flat called Kentish knock : so that the English, finding some of their ships a-ground, were obliged to alter their course ; but perceiving early the next morning that the Hollanders had forsaken their station, they pursued them with all the speed that the wind, which was weak and uncertain, allowed, but found themselves unable to reach them with the bulk of their fleet, and therefore detached some of the lightest frigates to chase them. These came so near as to fire upon them about three in the afternoon ; but the Dutch, instead of tacking about, hoisted their sails, steered toward their own coast, and finding themselves the next day followed by the whole English fleet, retired into Goree. The sailors were eager to attack them in their own harbours ; but a council of war being convened, it was judged imprudent to hazard the fleet upon the shoals, or to engage in any important enterprise without a fresh supply of provisions.

That in this engagement the victory belonged to the English is beyond dispute ; since, without the loss of one ship, and with no more than 40 men killed, they drove the enemy into his own ports, took the rear-admiral and another vessel, and so discouraged the Dutch admirals, who had not agreed in their measures, that Do Ruyter, who had declared against hazarding a battle, desired to resign his commission, and De Witt, who had insisted upon fighting, fell sick, as it was supposed, with vexation. But how great the loss of the Dutch was is not certainly known ; that two ships were taken they are too wise to deny, but affirm that those two were all that were destroyed. The English, on the other side, affirm that three of their vessels were disabled at the first encounter, that their numbers on the second day were visibly diminished, and that on the last day they saw three or four ships sink in their flight.

De Witt being now discharged by the Hollanders as unfortunate, and the chief command restored to Van Trump, great preparations were made for retrieving their reputation, and repairing their losses. Their endeavours were assisted by the English themselves, now made factious by success ; the men who were intrusted with

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the civil administration being jealous of those whose military commands had procured so much honour, lest they who raised them should be eclipsed by them. Such is generally the revolution of affairs in every State; danger and distress produce unanimity and bravery, virtues which are seldom unattended with success; but success is the parent of pride, and pride of jealousy and faction; faction makes way for calamity, and happy is that nation whose calamities renew their unanimity. Such is the rotation of interests, that equally tend to hinder the total destruction of a people, and to obstruct an exorbitant increase of power.

Blake had weakened his fleet by many detachments, and lay with no more than 40 sail in the Downs, very ill provided both with men and ammunition, and expecting new supplies from those whose animosity hindered them from providing them, and who chose rather to see the trade of their country distressed, than the sea officers exalted by a new acquisition of honour and influence.

Van Trump, desirous of distinguishing himself at the resumption of his command by some remarkable action, had assembled 50 ships of war, and 10 fire-ships, and steered towards the Downs, where Blake, with whose condition and strength he was probably acquainted, was then stationed. Blake not able to restrain his natural ardour, or perhaps not fully informed of the superiority of his enemies, put out to encounter them, though his fleet was so weakly manned, that half of his ships were obliged to lie idle without engaging, for want of sailors: the force of the whole Dutch fleet was therefore sustained by about 22 ships. Two of the English frigates, named the Vanguard and the Victory, after having for a long time stood engaged amidst the whole Dutch fleet, broke through without much injury, nor did the English lose any ships till the evening, when the Garland, carrying 40 guns, was boarded at once by two great ships, which were opposed by the English till they had scarcely any men left to defend the decks; then retiring into the lower part of the vessel, they blew up their decks, which were now possessed by the enemy, and at length were overpowered and taken. The Bonaventure, a stout well-built merchant ship, going to relieve the Garland, was attacked by a man of war, and after a stout resistance, in which the captain, who defended her with the utmost bravery, was killed, was likewise carried off by the Dutch. Blake, in the