

SOUTH AFRICA AND IMPERIAL NAVAL DEFENCE

Introduction

There are various themes which emerge in a consideration of South Africa's involvement in British naval policy. There is the expansion of the British empire itself, from its Atlantic beginnings into eastern seas and its century-long conflict with France. There is the theme of India, and the fluctuating fortunes of a trading company. There are the changes in marine technology and the world's balance of naval power. All of these broad themes must be considered if the South African contribution is to be seen in its proper context.

The essential oneness of the sea gives it a peculiar strategic quality, so that a battle in the English Channel or off the Spanish coast could determine the future of a far-flung empire and the security of possessions thousands of miles away in distant oceans.

Nor would it be right to concentrate on the Cape as the key to the Indies: almost every island in the Indian Ocean has been that before now. The interest of South Africa's role in naval history lies rather in these constantly changing patterns and themes, on the development of a white society in Southern Africa itself, and the creation of semi-independent and independent white communities which eventually formed an integral part of the empire defended by the Imperial fleet. In the twentieth century a fresh theme appears, that of Dominion partnership in Imperial policy-making.

How far off this seems from the time when European sailors first entered Indian seas.

Part I. 1500—1815

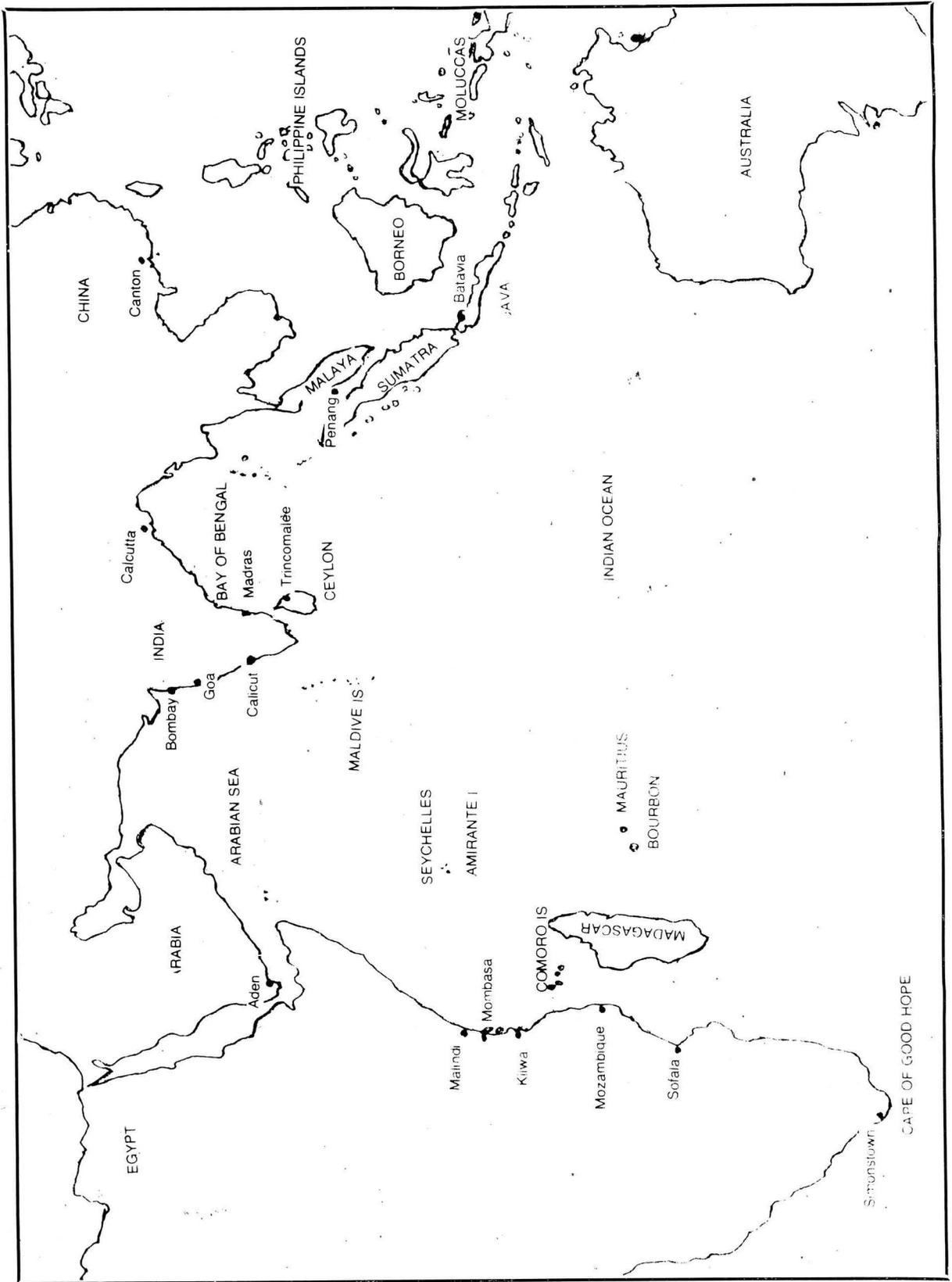
The voyages of discovery undertaken in the mid-fifteenth century by European navigators unwittingly inaugurated a dramatic shift in the balance of world power and economic strength. Western Europe had turned in upon itself since the decline of the Roman Empire, and most of the efforts of its rulers had been devoted to the organisation of war on quasi-national lines. Europe had in fact

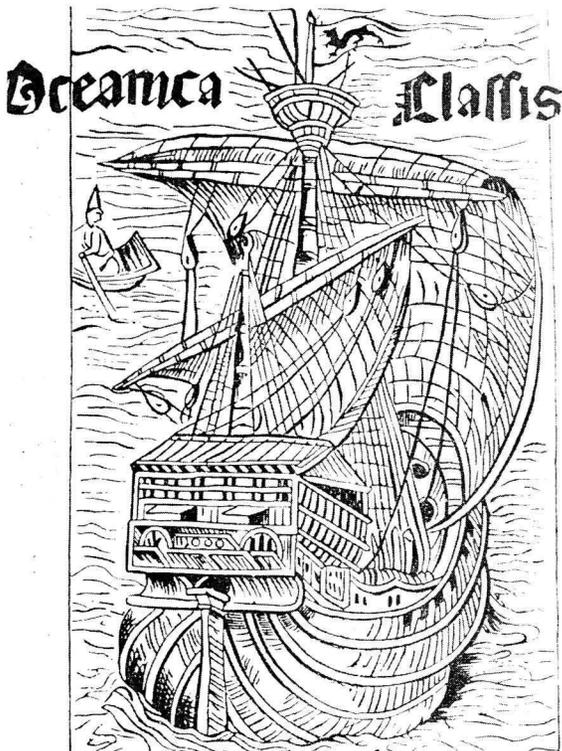
militarised its peasant societies to an unprecedented extent, and the dangers of a turbulent continent provided the spur for scientific discovery and an increasingly systematic exploitation of national resources.

Gold and silver were not the only commodities among the primary objects of trade coveted by merchants and princes. Spices and herbs had been vital to the manufacture of medicines, and aromatic herbs for the kitchens of the rich enlivened the diet and prevented the deterioration of food. For thousands of years spices came overland to Europe from the East. This trade had been disrupted by the rise of Islam however, and for many years Venice alone managed to secure the spices filtering through the markets of Alexandria, and erected a rich city-state on the exorbitant profits of their distribution to the rest of Europe.

By the last third of the fifteenth century other European nations had determined to break the Venetian monopoly of this lucrative trade, employing their navigational skills to outflank the Mediterranean and Middle East and to reach the source of supply itself. In 1492 Columbus, attempting to reach the Indies by sailing westwards, opened the eyes of Europe to a previously untapped source of wealth, a 'New World', rich in precious metals. In the race to the East, Portugal remained at the forefront, aided by the knowledge already learned during trade with Africa. At the end of the century Da Gama reached Calicut, and confirmed the fabulous expectations conjured up by the spice trade by returning with sufficient merchandise to pay for his expedition sixty-fold.

The quest for domination of the spice trade thus accidentally revealed unexpected wealth in a new continent as well as confirming knowledge of the riches of the Orient, and immediately added the factor of oceanic sea-power to the European political balance. The old empires of the Mediterranean were inevitably eclipsed and replaced by new ones established by nations favoured with an Atlantic seaboard.





The 'Santa Maria', Columbus' flagship on his first voyage to the New World



Vasco da Gama, discoverer of the sea route to India

For the first fifty years Spain and Portugal enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the fruits of empire. After Da Gama's voyage the Portuguese rapidly established their hold over the trade of the East, warding off the military challenges of Arabia and Egypt and benefitting hugely from the political weakness of India. Along the Portuguese captains' route to the Indies lay St. Helena, Sofala, Mombasa, Mozambique and Quiboa, all of which were secured as trading ports or stations. In view of the later importance of the Cape of Good Hope it seems necessary to explain here why the Portuguese made no permanent use of its facilities. Although Portuguese navigators had quickly discovered those Atlantic routes which made best advantage of prevailing currents and winds, in the Indian Ocean they followed the old Arab traders' practice of monsoon navigation, using virtually the same route for both outward and homeward journeys. In the Atlantic the Portuguese ships called at Madeira, the Cape Verde Islands, St. Helena or the Azores. There was little need for a station at the south-west point of Africa therefore, the more so as delays were likely to occur only on entering the monsoon navigation area. For this reason the Portuguese chose Mozambique as their southern African station, at the end of the 2 000 mile coasting trip where delays of months might be necessary while awaiting the favourable season.

For the first fifty years the Iberian powers were allowed to enjoy their imperial monopoly virtually unmolested. Certainly there was little in the occasional plundering raid to suggest the coming struggle for empire. Dutch maritime potential was still unrealised under Spanish rule while England, under the new dynasty of the Tudors, was only just beginning to lay the foundations of a fighting fleet to protect herself from invasion across the narrow seas. Among the nations bordering the Atlantic Britain enjoyed a great advantage; geography and meteorology combined to provide a natural barrier against European aggressors and obviated the need to maintain a large standing army. England, despite her poverty in manpower and natural resources, was consequently able to invest in maritime enterprise to an extent which would have been quite beyond the means of a continental state of the same size or wealth.

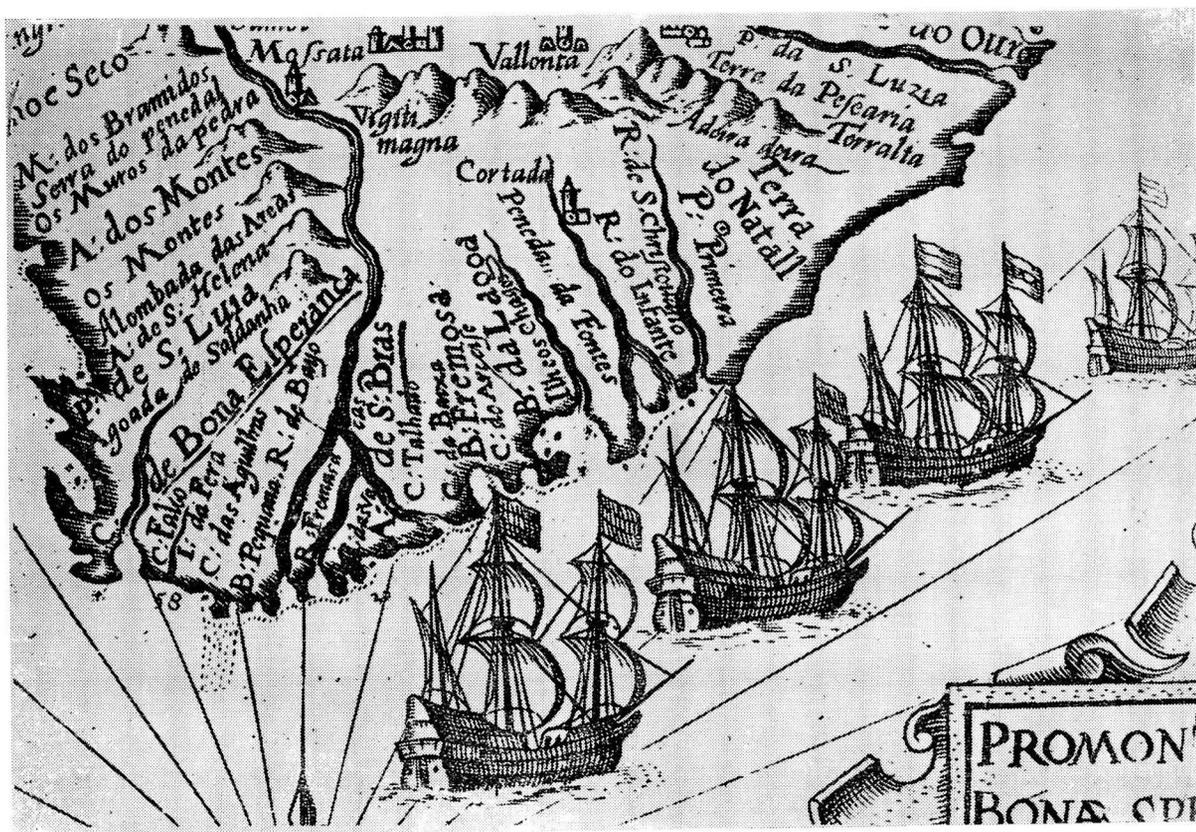
The inevitable challenge to Iberian supremacy came in the second half of the sixteenth century. New voyages of discovery encouraged English captains to attack the trade monopolies of Spain and Portugal. Dutch rebellion and European religious rivalries were added to mercantile competition, inaugurating a period of endemic war lasting well into the seventeenth century, during which English and Dutch seamen waged a sporadic and profitable campaign against Spanish and Portuguese galleons and bases. Gradually it was realised that the cutting of sea communications could seriously affect the military capacity of a great European state. Spain paid dearly for her failure to channel the gold of the New World into an efficient system of maritime defence, and the ravages of the privateering wars, managed from London and Amsterdam like joint-stock enterprises, brought Spain to the verge of bankruptcy.

Portugal too had neglected to benefit from her early trading monopoly in the East. Metropolitan Portugal produced little that was wanted in the Indies and had a decided aversion to the export of silver. This situation

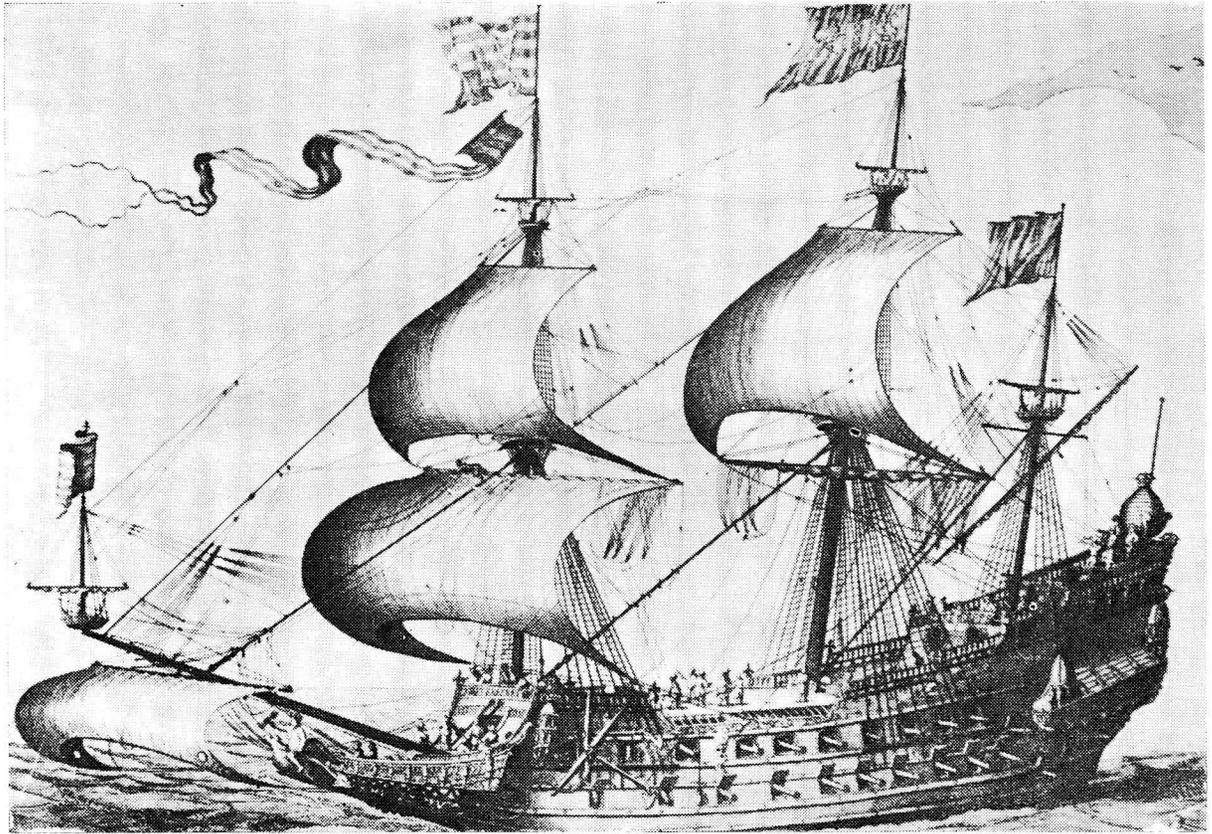
scarcely mattered in the good old days when trade amounted to little more than buccaneering, but the failure to vitalise the Portuguese economy with colonial wealth led to domestic collapse as an ever-increasing section of Portuguese society became parasitically dependent upon the easy wealth of the Indies, which was now becoming less certain.

The Thirty Years War which began in 1618 ravaged large areas of Europe and involved most of the continental states in bitter and destructive conflict. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Spain had been committed to nearly a hundred years of warfare, which had worn away her Continental dominance. Even the annexation of Portugal in 1640 could not revive Spanish fortunes and she emerged from her war with France in 1659 in a state of collapse.

Of the European nations the United Provinces had escaped the wars fairly lightly, indeed they had vastly increased their share of Europe's maritime trade during the conflict, and had confirmed their independence of Spain. The first half of the seventeenth century saw the Dutch gradually developing their



Houtman's Anglo-Dutch fleet rounding the Cape of Good Hope in 1595



The 'Jupiter', a Dutch East Indiaman, 1626; she was as heavily armed as a warship

maritime ascendancy by the hard-headed application of a systematic mercantilist policy. The merchants of Amsterdam had realised the interdependence of economic prosperity, a merchant marine, overseas colonies and a large navy, and based their aggressive imperial policy accordingly. The chief instrument of the Dutch penetration of the Orient was the Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602. From the South African point of view this enterprise occupies a vital place in the history of white settlement.

The Company immediately challenged the Portuguese monopoly in the Indies and Dutch navigators soon proved the superior value of the southerly trade routes leading to the Straits of Sunda and the Java Sea. After some setbacks in the face of Portuguese resistance along the northern edge of the Indian Ocean, the Company effectively outflanked their rivals and seized Djakarta from the Javanese in 1618, renaming it Batavia and establishing the centre from which they would extend their commercial control to the west and north-east.

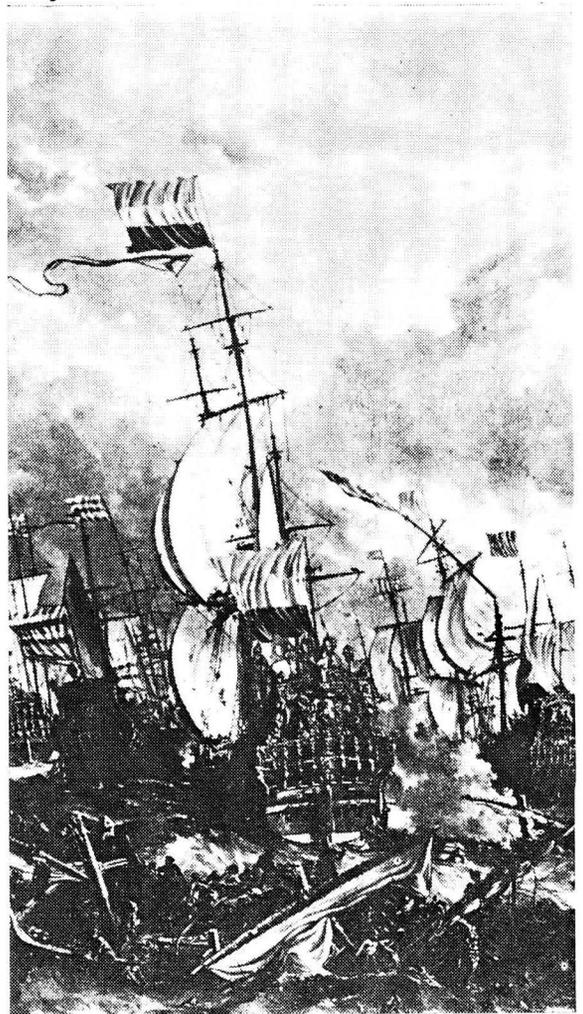
The Dutch discovery of the southerly trade routes had other important strategic consequences. Sailing ships trading between Western Europe and the Indies now made their outward and homeward voyages by different routes, in order to make the best use of currents and winds. Ships trading with Java need pass through only two points on both outward and homeward routes, one in mid-Atlantic and the other at the Cape of Good Hope. The situation was more complicated for merchantmen trading to India itself, but even for them the South African coast was the only one accessible at all seasons of the year.

Ships were still comparatively small and slow, with little room for adequate provisions, and diseases exacerbated by the long, enforced absence of fresh food sometimes took such a toll of seamen that precious ships and cargoes were lost. The need for an effective refreshment station was an urgent one therefore, particularly on the route to the Java Sea. St. Helena had been previously used by the Dutch on the homeward voyage but the route

to the Indies missed the island by 1 200 miles, while Mauritius, taken by the Dutch in 1638, was really too close to the Indies to serve as a halfway-house. Ships regularly touched at the Cape itself for refreshment, and as early as 1619 the idea was mooted of Anglo-Dutch co-operation in establishing a permanent refreshment station there.

By 1640 the wild pigs and goats of St. Helena had almost been exterminated and another station had to be chosen out of necessity. Eventually the advantages of the Cape were accepted for, despite the seasonal dangers of its harbour, it provided a temperate climate immune from the tropical fevers which ravaged most African stations. In 1652 Van Riebeeck laid the foundation of the permanent establishment at the Cape of Good Hope. From here the company's ships sailed on to Batavia, from where the Dutch dominated the trade of the Indian Ocean by 1650. The Spanish annexation of Portugal in 1640 had proved an almost unmixed evil for the latter, for Spain required all her energy to hold her precious American possessions, and the Portuguese empire in the east was neglected. So successful was Dutch economic exploitation of the Indies that, despite the high expenditure necessitated by constant warfare, the period 1600-1650 saw the Company reap an annual dividend averaging 25%.

The first major challenge to Dutch naval supremacy followed almost immediately on the occupation of the Cape. The English too were interested in the eastern trade, though in their case this centred on India, and on the operations of the Honourable East India Company, founded in 1600. In the East there was little cause for rivalry with the Dutch, besides, the political and financial difficulties of Britain's Stuart kings had had a disastrous effect on the island kingdom's naval strength. The civil war had resulted in a change of government however, and the inauguration of the sterner regime of the Commonwealth. The men who ruled England now were much closer to the Dutch in their realisation of the importance of trade, and of the significance of seapower in securing that trade. The statesmen and naval commanders of Cromwell's Commonwealth were coming to realise that only constant supremacy at sea gave any hope of achieving the defence both of England and of the distant trade routes so essential to an



De Ruyter's victory over the English in the 'Four Days' Battle', 1666

expanding empire. By systematising the Navigation Acts, Cromwell's government encouraged the growth of the British merchant marine and provided a potential cause for war against rival maritime powers. The net result was a temporary replacement of the Dutch naval ascendancy, and a great deal of damage to the merchant fleet of the United Provinces, but the British effort was too expensive and the restoration of the Stuart dynasty in 1660 brought another decline in English naval strength.

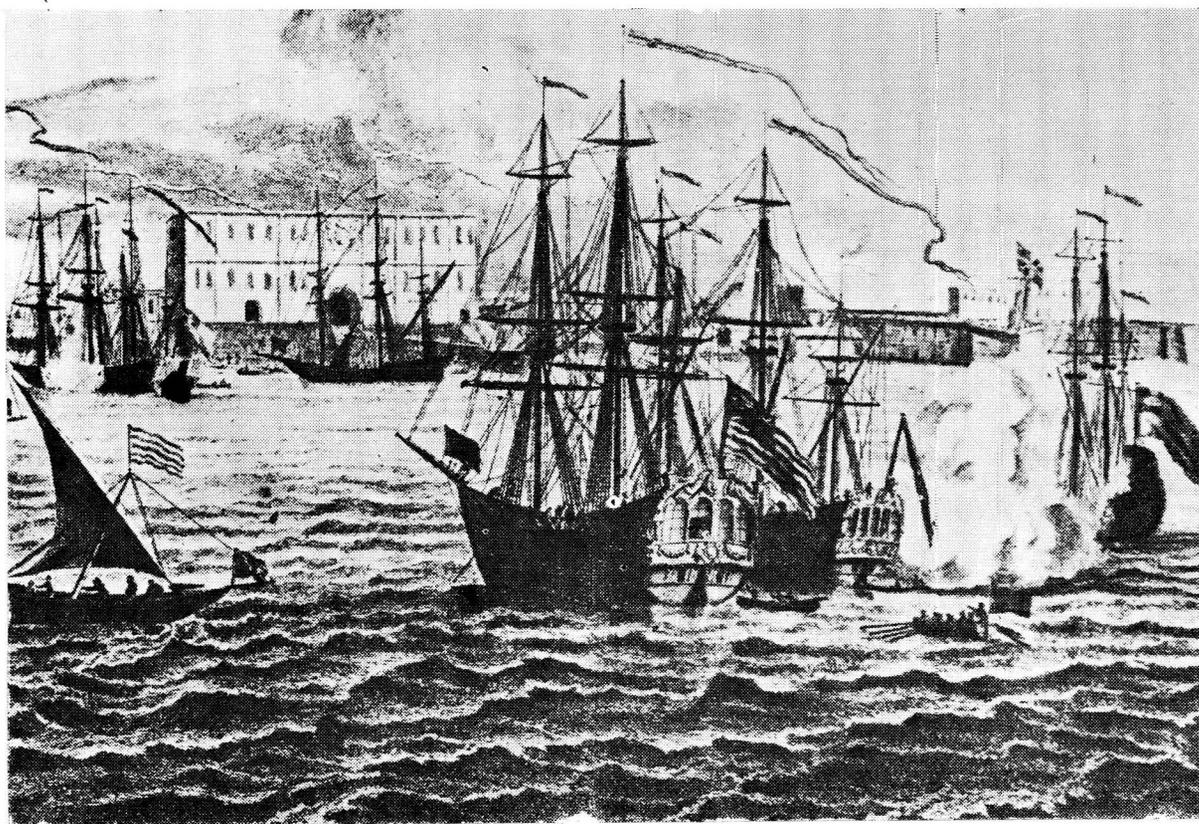
The Dutch survived this threat, but developments on land rather than at sea had dictated the end of their naval supremacy. The wars of the first half of the seventeenth century had seen Spain shattered, but France had emerged as a growing force. By the middle of the 1670's a temporary alliance of Britain and France saw the Netherlands having to

cope with an assault by land as well as sea. The emergence of a great land power on her borders meant that the Netherlands had to create a large and expensive army, for in a continental war her maritime strength counted for relatively little by itself. From now on, Dutch independence would require the diversion of resources from naval to land forces, a situation which could have only dire consequences for the overseas trading empire.

Before the end of the seventeenth century the French too had begun to show an interest in maritime power, under the energetic direction of Colbert, and had even formed a trading company in India. This change in policy, combined with the land threat to the Netherlands, eventually convinced Britain of the short-sightedness of her alliance with France, for by aiding the latter to destroy the independence of the United Provinces and to seize the Dutch coast opposite the Thames estuary, she would create a very powerful enemy for the future. Thus, for the last twenty years of the seventeenth century, Britain and the Netherlands allied to curb the power of France in wars which continued virtually un-



Jean Baptiste Colbert, 1619 — 83, Louis XIV's Minister of Marine, who advocated a naval and colonial policy for France



Indiamen anchored before Bombay in the early eighteenth century

abated until 1713. Fortunately for Britain, Colbert's policy for a maritime France was soon discarded, while Britain herself steadily expanded her fleet. While her supremacy at sea was unable to prevent the depredations of marauding French squadrons in distant seas, the Royal Navy's domination of home waters imposed a damaging blockade on France to which the latter's **guerre de course** could provide no answer.

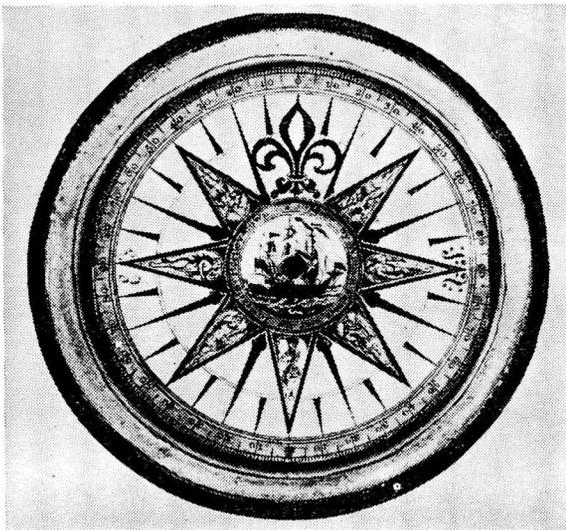
In addition to contributing to the humiliation of France, Britain's growing naval strength had secured a large part of the Spanish colonial trade for which she and France had been competing. The turn of the century saw the rapid development of British financial and commercial institutions, accelerated by the demands and opportunities of war. The results of the application of naval power united British trading and financial interests in their argument that maritime commerce and naval might were indissoluble.

For the next two decades British naval power was used to prevent Sweden or Russia gaining control of the Baltic, or Spain from making a recovery in the West Indies or Mediterranean. By 1730 the seaborne empire of Great Britain was maturing from a loose system of chartered companies, colonies and sea lanes into an ordered mercantilist network, organised by the increasingly complex and wealthy financial organisations of London.

Eighteenth century improvements in maritime technology served to accentuate British

supremacy. The invention of the marine sextant in 1730 and of a crude chronometer in 1735 combined to revolutionise marine navigation and thus aided the co-ordination of large numbers of vessels and the exploitation of even more distant seas. By the middle of the eighteenth century Cook and other British captains were pushing confidently into the Pacific.

During the war of the Austrian Succession, 1740-48, British seapower again came into its own, helping maintain the British position in North America, and checking the Spaniards in the West Indies and Mediterranean. In India the French under Dupleix made a determined attack upon the British company's position. With the political disintegration of the native Indian states now in an advanced stage, the European companies were compelled to take steps to secure their business and safety. Sepoys were enrolled in increasing numbers, but measures originally defensive in nature also helped when European rivalries



Compass card, floating on a needle in a bowl, made in England, 1750



James Cook, 1728 — 79, whose voyages of discovery helped draw the Empire eastwards

made a renewed appearance. At sea the British were at a disadvantage in the Indian Ocean, for they had not yet secured any territory on the long sea route to India nearer to the sub-continent than St. Helena, while France possessed in Mauritius a first rate naval base. In 1744 a French squadron sailed from this island and aided in the capture of Madras, for the Royal Navy as yet had no squadron in eastern waters.

Achievements of this nature could only be transient in the face of Britain's overall command of the world's oceans however, and Madras was restored at the peace of 1748. The peace was in fact little more than a truce, and in India not even that, for regardless of the European situation the French and English companies now continued a desultory war, aided by their Indian confederates, until Dupleix was removed in 1754.

Two years later general conflict broke out again and the war began badly for Britain. Eventually under Pitt's direction British policy became more purposeful, and by providing Prussia with subsidies Britain was able to find an ally to wage war against France by land, while her own naval strength was put

to work in striking determinedly at France's overseas bases. Pitt's strategy was partly founded on his desire to end the French threat to the North American colonies, but also owed something to his almost fanatical drive to strike deep at France's national strength by destroying her commerce and by establishing British colonial trade as a decisive weight in the European balance.

In India the war gave the British company another chance to assert itself over France's native allies, By the end of the war the Company was truly in the ascendant and the Indian Ocean was virtually a British lake. Trade with the East had expanded from its narrow basis of spices to include luxury goods, indigo, jute, raw cotton, silk, saltpetre and wheat. The remainder of the century was to see a phenomenal growth in the coffee and tea trade, while the industrial revolution would provide manufactured goods for India. The geographical isolation of India from Asia made her turn towards the oceans for her trade, and the British industrial advance and the impact of western produce on Indian life drew the subcontinent increasingly into the European, and largely British economic sphere.



The 'press-gang', a notorious method of recruiting for the Fleet in the eighteenth century

As for the Dutch, by the mid-eighteenth century their eastern empire was already in decline, for, like their predecessors the Portuguese, they had found the maintenance of a world-wide commercial system an increasing drain on their limited resources and manpower. The Netherlands East India Company itself was riddled with corruption and by the late 1770's had lapsed into a state of near-bankruptcy.

France now provided the only significant threat to Britain's domination of the world's trade, and France was the one power against which the Royal Navy could never prove decisive, for blockade and commerce destruction could never exhaust her vast resources of men or the fertility of her soil. Only by land could final victory be assured, and for this Britain needed Continental allies.

The rebellion of the American colonies made this quite clear in the war of 1775-83. Gradually alienating the remainder of Europe by her exclusive mercantile laws and naval pretensions Britain managed to lose her absolute supremacy at sea, while at the same time a land war against the self-sufficient American colonies and their European allies gradually proved too great a burden.

This war also provided the French with an opportunity to recoup their losses in the East. In 1779 French intrigue among the Indian princes resulted in a powerful anti-British combination in the sub-continent. The threat on land coincided with the loss of supremacy at sea and in 1780 the Company's trading fleet of over sixty ships, part of which carried munitions to India, was taken by a Spanish squadron.

In 1781 the Directors of the East India Company forcefully expressed the opinion that the Cape was the key to India's security. The Netherlands having ceased to be a friendly power, the Cape was now supplying the French base of Mauritius. In that same year therefore an expedition was despatched under Admiral Johnstone to seize the South African station. The British squadron was forestalled however by the arrival at the Cape of the French admiral Suffren, who put the Cape into a state of defence, so that Johnstone had to return with his mission unaccomplished.

With the Royal Navy in toils the French were able to convey substantial reinforcements to their bases in India and that the Company survived was mainly due to the energetic leadership of Warren Hastings and Eyre Coote.

At sea Hughes and Suffren fought a series of hard battles in Indian waters, actions which had little effect on events on land to be sure, but which were significant because they shifted the scene of conflict towards the east coast of India. During the seventeenth century, European competition had mainly centred on the principal dockyard of Bombay, but on the east coast to which the strategic centre had now shifted, not one harbour existed south of Calcutta. The reason for the change of theatre lay in the geography and climate of the ocean: from November to February the north-east monsoon and its unpredictable hurricanes exposed India's Coromandel coast to attack from Malayan waters. During this time of the year any defending fleet anchored at Madras courted disaster, and ships based at Bombay could never reach the threatened coast in time. The growing trade with China was another strong argument for the establishment of a base further east and in 1786 the British secured the island of Penang.

The loss of the thirteen colonies enforced a temporary interruption in Britain's maritime expansion. The loss of the British colonial system led directly to the creation of a new commercial empire however, and the focus of British imperial interest was shifted decisively from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.

From the Channel to the Malabar and Coromandel coasts Britain held not a single port capable of providing shelter, protection or refreshment for her vessels. St. Helena was there, but she was not self-supporting, and would be easily isolated and rendered useless in wartime. The dangers to India during the American War of Independence led the East India Company to consider the establishment of an intermediate base immediately after the cessation of hostilities. In 1784 Henry Dundas became President of the Company's Board of Control and a year later he considered a report on the desirability of establishing a British base in southern Africa. The site under consideration was Krom River Bay, now called St. Francis Bay, 35 miles west of Algoa



Horatio Nelson, 1758 — 1805, as a nineteen year old lieutenant. He was to become the greatest naval commander of his age

Bay and some 500 miles east of the Cape. The temptation was considerable, for here was an area, fertile, well-wooded and as yet only sparsely inhabited by white farmers. In the event of war Krom River Bay would even provide an ideal place from which to launch on attack on the Cape itself. But Dundas eventually rejected the scheme as being only too likely to antagonise the Dutch at a time when the diplomatic situation was unsettled. Indeed in 1787 he suggested that the Netherlands be courted into the triple alliance by offering collaboration of the English and Dutch companies trading with the Orient, with the latter securing a share of the opium traffic in return for concessions at the Cape and Trincomalee.

In 1792 the French began the export of their revolution, against the supporters of the **ancien regime** beyond the nation's borders.

Within the year old treaties were torn up and the armies of the Revolution were threatening the Scheldt and Holland. Britain now found herself at war again, largely because of her traditional opposition to the occupation of the Low Countries by the most powerful Continental state. In addition, in the light of a probable, and possibly successful, attack on the Netherlands, Britain was naturally concerned that the Dutch overseas possessions should not fall into hostile hands.

Already in March 1793 the Cape had ceased to supply the French islands in the Indian Ocean, but negotiations between Britain and the Netherlands for the protection of the Cape met with Dutch reluctance to admit British soldiers to her territories. No arrangement had been concluded by the winter of 1794-5 when the armies of France eventually overran the Netherlands. The Stadholder and his supporters fled to England, and the French established a Republic over the old United Provinces, which immediately signed an alliance with their erstwhile enemies against Britain. It was now clear that unless Britain took the Cape it would pass effectively into French possession and in April 1795 two squadrons totalling ten ships under Admiral Sir George Elphinstone and Commodore Blankett left England carrying a military force of 1 600 men, commanded by Major-General Craig. A further force of 14 ships and 5 000 men was despatched to Brazil under Major-General Clarke, to await events.

The deposed Stadholder, Prince William, had given his consent to the British occupation of what he still regarded as his possessions. Accordingly Elphinstone and Craig attempted to secure the Cape by peaceful negotiations at first. The local Dutch Governor, Sluysken, was in an awkward position, being unaware of the precise position in Europe, and being painfully conscious of the inadequacy of the Cape's defences to resist a determined assault. He therefore temporised, drawing out negotiations until he finally received news of the French alliance with the Batavian Republic, whereupon he terminated the talks, stopped the supply of fresh produce to the British force and withdrew to a strongly fortified position at Muizenberg. This position fell to the British on 7 August, but they still found themselves in a precarious position. With his force badly hit by sickness, Craig

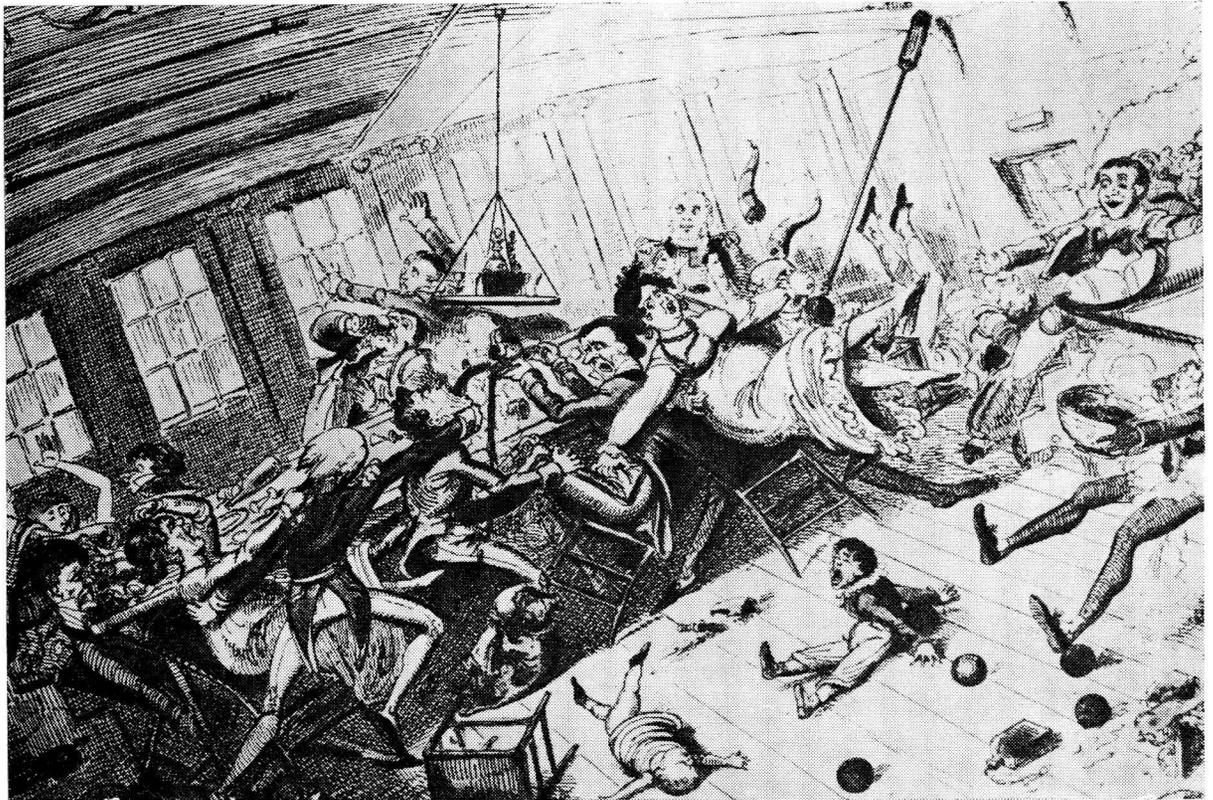


Canton, which by 1805 had become the centre of the eastern trade with the western world

could not guarantee the seizure of Cape Town. He waited for Clarke's force therefore and Sluysken was forced to surrender on 16 September. The first British occupation of the Cape had begun. After beating off a Dutch attempt to retake the colony, the British authorities set about organising their relationship with the local population. Even under Dutch rule, the local farmers had not enjoyed particularly good relations with their governors, local and company interests had rarely coincided, and on the eastern frontier disaffection had flared into rebellion and a rejection of Cape Town's authority. By the time Lord Macartney arrived to take the post of Governor in May 1797 this particular rising had abated, but it was an accurate indication of the determination with which an inherent difference of interest would be pursued in future.

Macartney was a man of great ability and wide experience as a diplomatist, government adviser and colonial administrator. He realised almost immediately that the Cape would prove wholly useless as a market for British goods, nor did he see much of a future as an entrepôt for a remunerative trade with

equatorial Africa or the Arab merchants of the East African coast. On the contrary the colony would be expensive to garrison and the ships based there would alone cost some £250,000 a year. Nonetheless, Macartney was convinced of the value of the Cape's retention in the light of the East India Company's links with the East. In recent years these links had been expanding, with the growth of the South Sea whale fisheries and the Australian colonies, the latter now with a white population of about 12 000. More important by far however, was the gradually changing nature of the Company's connection with India. The years of involvement in struggle with the French, and the accompanying disintegration of native Indian government had forced the company to become a semi-government department itself in many respects. By 1795 the transformation from commercial to governing institution was still incomplete, but conquest was gradually superseding trade in British interests in India. In 1793 the Company had again resisted attempts to break its monopoly of British trade east of the Cape, and its privileges had been extended to 1814, largely due to the efforts of Henry Dundas.



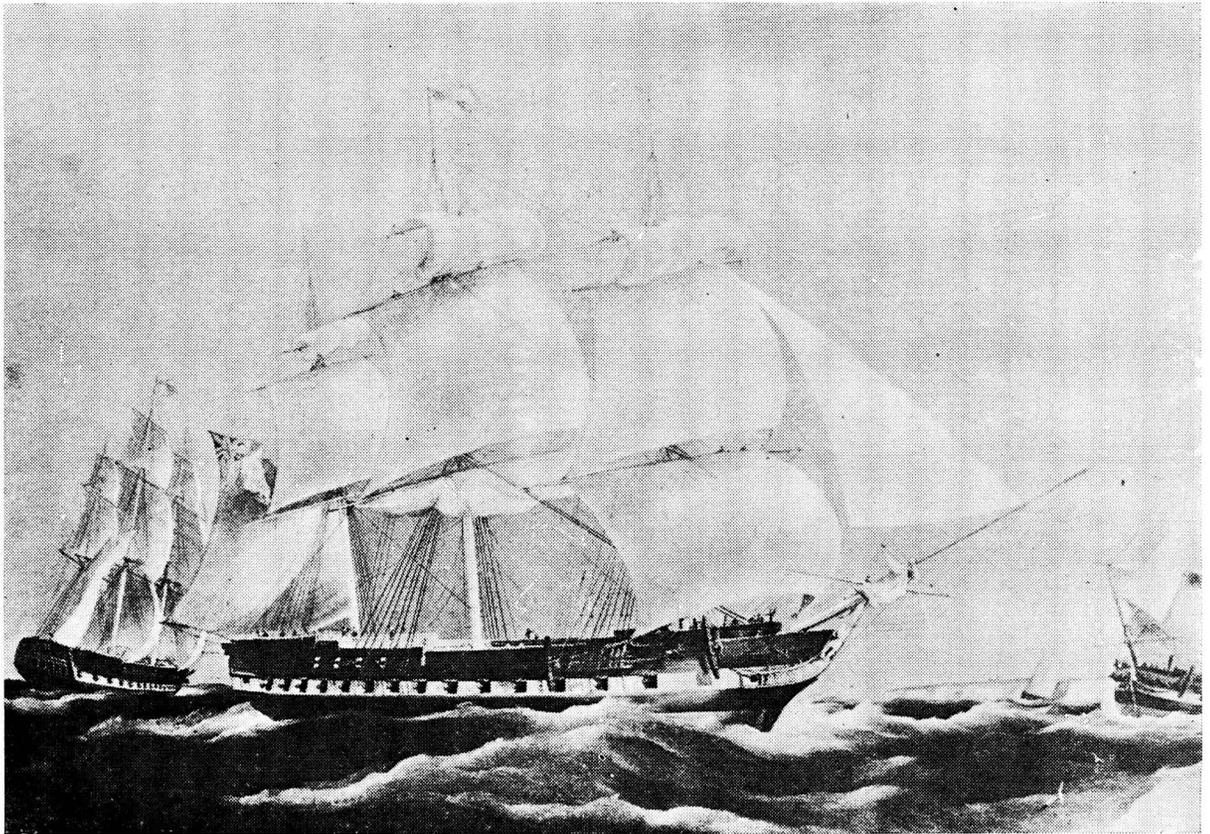
Cruikshank's impression of the passengers' cabin of an Indiaman in a gale, 1815. The wine was slung from the rafters on cords to prevent spilling

Once the Cape had been occupied the question of the Company monopoly came to the fore. Numbers of neutral vessels called at the Cape in the course of their trade with the East, and many of them were suspected of supplying the French in the Indian Ocean. Macartney arrived with an Order in Council dealing with the trade position, and with few alterations this regulated the external trade of the Cape until the colony's retrocession. Basically the regulations permitted the import of goods from His Majesty's dominions free of charge, while imposing a small duty on those imported from friendly powers. The Company itself was not interested in the Cape as a market for its produce, indeed, it adopted a rather negative attitude to Cape trade, being mainly concerned with preventing the colony from becoming a clandestine entrepôt for Asiatic goods, which would then be resold to competitors undermining the Company's monopoly. Such was the concern at the activities of these interlopers that the Company's attitude towards the Cape station's strategic value soon altered. By 1797 the Directors were arguing that its retention

was quite unnecessary while Britain ruled the high seas.

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 revealed a new aspect of the Eastern problem. The immediacy of this new threat focussed Britain's strategic attentions on the Mediterranean, and on Malta in particular. Nelson's great victory at the Nile in 1799 and a landing at Aboukir in 1801 defeated the French in the Middle East, while Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, subjugated Napoleon's Indian allies and extended British control in India still further.

These campaigns both contributed to the doubts being expressed about the Cape's role as a key to India. Events in South Africa confirmed the reluctance to hold on to the new possession, by proving how impossible it was to hold the Cape without becoming involved in the politics of the hinterland. Britain simply required an obedient white population, staying out of conflict with the African tribes of the eastern districts, while the white settlers consistently demanded the government's protection on their own terms. Soon Imperial troops



The East Indiaman, 'Herefordshire', built of teak at Bombay in 1813, she displaced 1,342 tons and was armed with 26 guns

were involved in war against the Xhosa and in putting down insurrection among the frontiersmen. Expensive political involvements combined with the Cape's inability to furnish adequate and assured supplies began to make the colony unpopular with administration and soldiers alike.

When the Pitt government fell in 1801, taking Dundas with it, the Cape lost its best champion. The new administration, under Addington showed an immediate willingness to give up the colony in the peace negotiations which now began. Leading naval authorities pointed out that Britain's naval supremacy was now such that intermediate stations on the Cape route were an expensive superfluity. The Royal Navy could muster 202 ships of the line to France's 39, and 277 frigates to her 35. Nelson himself argued that improvements in shipbuilding and design made a port of call en route to India an unnecessary delaying factor. At the peace preliminaries, signed on 1 October 1801, Britain relinquished the Cape, retaining Ceylon as her only island station in the Indian Ocean. The Peace of Amiens,

finally signed in March 1802, returned the Cape to the Batavian Republic, and the British garrison departed in February 1803.

Malta, also conceded by Britain in the peace treaty, was not evacuated however, for it became apparent that Napoleon had not abandoned his scheme of aggrandisement in the East. In May 1803 war broke out again, and Britain was soon made aware of the short-sightedness of surrendering the Cape. In the first two years of the war Napoleon developed a new and extensive system of naval strategy in which the Cape occupied a place of considerable significance. Admiral Linois' squadron, based at Mauritius, did considerable damage to the Company's trade, but the final argument for a British assault on the Cape came when the French made a feint towards India as part of the campaign to invade Britain in 1805.

In July 1805 61 ships under Popham conveyed Major-General Baird's 6 700 men towards the Cape. By January 1806 the Batavian government had surrendered the colony once more. The British government would not

relinquish this station so lightly at the next peace.

Trafalgar had shattered the French fleet in 1805 and foiled Napoleon's plans for an assault across the Channel. Now he put his faith in a Continental blockade, keeping British goods out of Europe and thus hoping to create economic ruin and social unrest. One of the results of this policy was to make Britain increasingly dependent upon her trade in distant seas, particularly with India. The importance of the Cape station increased therefore, especially as French cruisers from Mauritius and Bourbon made convoys essential. By 1809 the depredations of the French in the Indian Ocean were serious enough to warrant an attack on their bases for cruiser operations. Blockade had failed to contain the **guerre de course**, however well this strategy succeeded in frustrating Napoleon's naval plans in European waters. The occupation of the Cape had not starved the French bases, which continued to secure supplies from Mozambique and Madagascar. In 1810 British forces reduced both Mauritius and Bourbon and by 1815 the Royal Navy's supremacy in the Indian Ocean was unchallenged.

At the peace settlement of 1814-15 Britain was generous with her conquests; Java and its neighbours were returned to the Dutch, Bourbon and several ports in Madagascar and

India to the French. To secure her Indian domains Britain retained the Cape, Ceylon, Mauritius, the Seychelles and soon added Aden. The Indian Ocean was to remain a British sea until 1941.

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