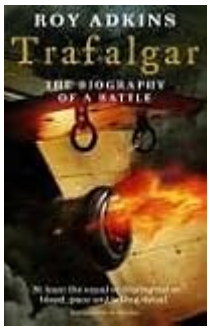
SPLICE THE MAINBRACE - TWO BOOKS...

Posted on November 20, 2010 by Eddie

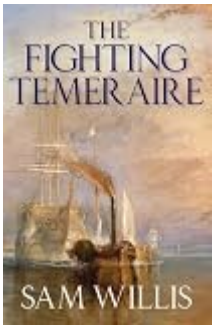
Category: Reviews



There is something about 'the age of sail' which captures the imagination of writers and readers. Over the years, I've thoroughly enjoyed reading all about Hornblower, Aubrey and Maturin, Richard Bolitho and a host of other mariners who sailed the seven seas and defeated Johnny Frenchman. Almost all of my knowledge of the period has been derived from works of fiction; I've read very little real history.

This month, by coincidence I've found myself reading two fascinating popular history books that dealt in some depth with the maritime conflict between England and France at the end of the 1700s and start of the 1800s.I picked up one of them in an airport bookstore to while away a night flight and a kindly family member provided the other for a recent birthday.

Trafalgar: The Biography of a Battle by Roy Adkins does what it says on the tin. It is a fine overview of what happened before, during and immediately after the famous battle. A good deal of the material is derived from eyewitness reports from both sides of the conflict and the experiences of individuals in the battle are given as much prominence as the issues of strategy and geo-politics which lay in the background. All in all it's a good read and well worth a few bob if you are interested in this period.



However, though I enjoyed Trafalgar, I don't think it is quite as succesful a book as The 'Fighting Temeraire': Legend of Trafalgar by Sam Willis. Rather than look at the details of a particular battle, or a period of history, this book simply tells the story of a ship: or rather of two ships. The couple ofÂ chapters are given over to the story of the TÃ©mÃ©raire a French ship which was conqured by the British in 1760. The rest of the book tells the story of the Temeraire, a newly launched British ship, which was named for the original captured French vessle (though without the French accents).

The story of the Temeraire is a fascinating one. When she was launched she had a revolutionary design for a fighting ship and she played a vital role at Trafalgar and served in a number of other important theatres. But forty years after her launch, she was obsolete and suffered the indignity of being towed to the breakers yard by one of the new-fangled steam tugs. Turner's famous painting captures the sunset of the sailing ship beautifully.

In telling the story of the Temeraire, Willis gives an excellent background to the events that he is describing and has produced an excellent introduction to the Napoleonic period in the process. Anyone interested in military history would thank you for giving them either of these books for Christmas (unless they had already bought them, I guess).