



The  
*Richard Boultho*  
Newsletter  
Issue XVI



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This issue was originally released in 1993.

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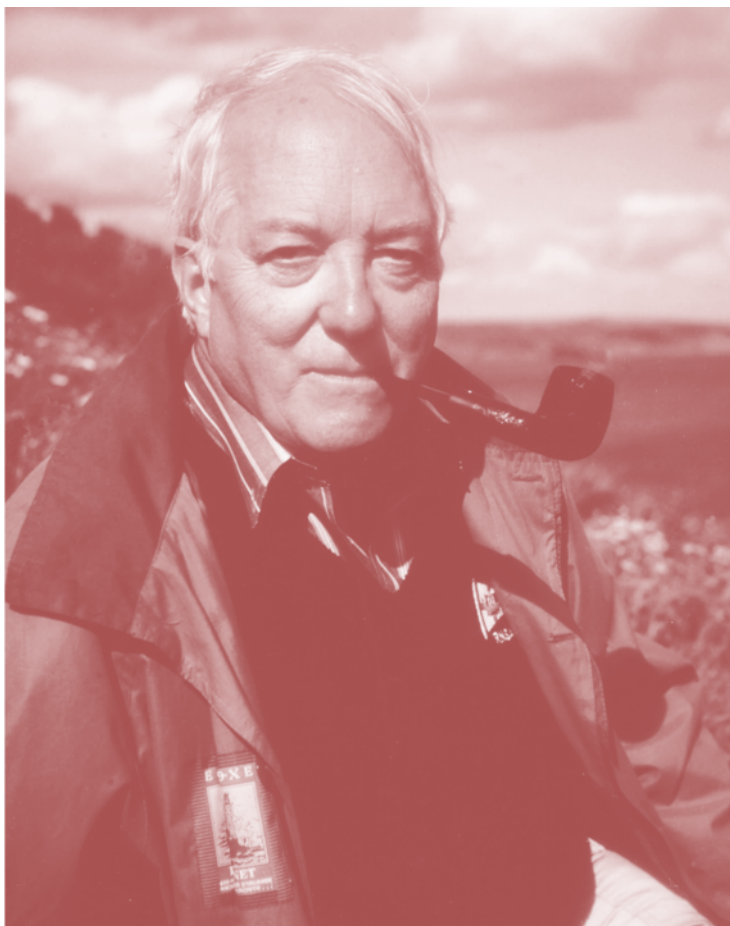
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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent

Photo by Kimberley Reeman

## Part One

### *The Twenty-First Book*

If I stop to think about it I am always amazed that it is time to put together another *Richard Bolitho Newsletter*, which will eventually find its way to Bolitho's friends and readers around the world.

Even the beginning of the series (the first book, *To Glory We Steer*, published in 1968) has a touch of fate about it. It was my American publisher at the time who suggested that I should turn my sights to the eighteenth century navy, something he knew had been of great interest to me since I was a little boy. I never lost this fascination, even when I was serving in the Royal Navy in the worst moments of the war.

I had been a professional writer of more modern novels with a sea flavour for ten years when I set about the task. Nobody knew what sort of reception the first book would have or how many stories could be written about a man like Bolitho. In the end, nobody can advise the writer – only he or she can decide the right approach.

There were a lot of decisions to be made, a lot of problems to be settled. If I made the descriptions of seamanship too technical, would it deter readers who lack such knowledge? If I made it too simplistic, would the sea buffs toss the book aside

in anger?

Even the first newsletter was started with a certain amount of trepidation. My publisher agreed to print it, but it would be my task to distribute it once a mailing list was created. A lot of envelopes and a lot of stamps!

But after the first three books in the series had been launched, the letters began to arrive. It is always such a pleasure to receive a letter from a reader, some one 'out there' who cares enough to put pen to paper. The numbers grew and grew and finally the publisher took pity on me and took over the distribution worldwide.

Who were these people, I wondered, who rallied



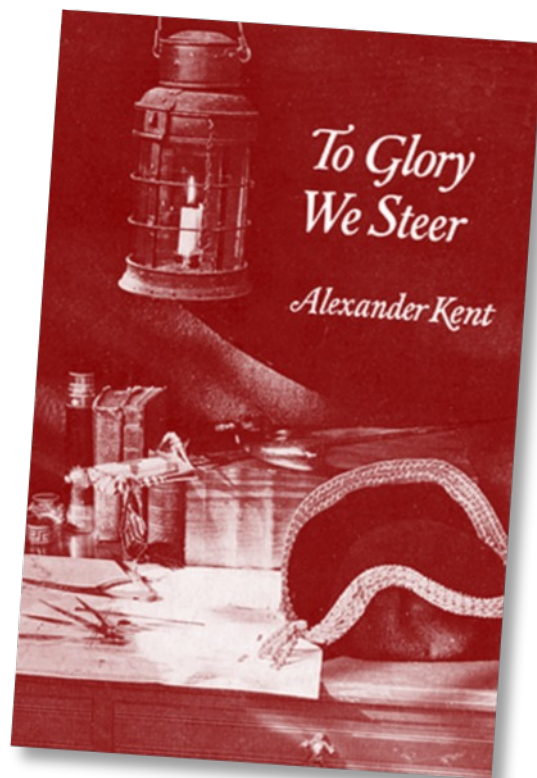
'To Glory We Steer', a sketch by English marine artist  
Geoffrey Huband

to my books of Bolitho's life and times? Was there an average reader somebody I could use as a reference to decide on points of interest or the opposite?

Now the twenty-first story is about to be published, and I have long ago discovered that there is no average reader. Thanks to you and your letters, and the precious moments when I actually meet some of you at some literary function, while signing books in a big London store or just down the road in our village bookshop, I have learned that Bolitho has a special appeal for all kinds of people. For the very young and the not-so-young, for professional people, for the armed services from admirals to seamen. My biggest surprise was that, from the very beginning, fifty percent of the letters I received were from women of all ages.

And what of the man himself, our Richard Bolitho? Like his readers, he has changed in some ways and matured in the only calling he and his family have ever known. After the heady broadsides and close actions of his early service in the King's name, he is more aware of the politics of his profession. I feel too, that like the many thousands of youngsters who fought in our war, he is sometimes disillusioned by his missions and the distant and unfathomable minds of admiralty.

His name I borrowed from a Cornishman I met in Jersey, when I owned a boat. I was helped to pick up my moorings in Gorey harbour on a falling tide by a kindly man who later introduced himself as 'Bolitho, Captain Richard Bolitho'. Years later when I was researching that first book, the name



came back to me. What better name? What better man than a Cornishman? And so it was settled.

Bolitho has changed my life completely. From being an exciting series to write, it has become like membership in an exclusive club.

If Richard Bolitho came to my house in modern dress, I would know him instantly.

He has honoured me, surprised me, moved me many times. Now in sixteen languages around the world, in large print for those not blessed with

perfect vision, in braille for those less fortunate, in hardback and paperback, and on cassettes: a man of his time we can all share.

He often mourns the missing faces of his Happy Few, and blames himself for the loss of friends killed in sea battles. A leader who can inspire proud qualities in poor wretches dragged aboard by the hated press gangs, but one who never loses the ability to show despair at the cost of lives lost at the cannon's mouth. Like one of the many family portraits on the walls of the old grey house in Falmouth, he is a part of England's history. But in his own eyes he is just a man. A sailor.

He will never fail his readers, as he has never failed me. As someone recently remarked, 'An' that's no error!'

## Part Two

### *The Essential Gentleman*

*by Kim Reeman*

A very young reader recently wrote that John Allday would be the perfect friend, but it was impossible to get enough of Richard Bolitho. She is twelve years old.

We may well ask what fascination this man holds for the thousands of women all over the world who, since 1968, have been reading the Bolitho series. These are, after all, novels of the sea, high adventure, technical in language and manoeuvre, and often bloodily violent.

They are also, of course, about people, and

specifically the life and times of Richard Bolitho. Early in his career the *New York Times* described him as 'James Bond with barnacles', and certainly that youthful swashbuckling quality was very attractive. The young Bolitho combines an undeniable sex appeal with the finest romantic attributes; romance in the sense of gallantry, courtesy and honour. Perhaps his appeal lies in the romance of the period: an eighteenth century of splendour and courtliness, exquisite clothing and manners, silks and jewels, powder and patch, the fan and the minuet. The reality is balanced by a harsher perception of the truth – poverty, crime and disease – but the Georgians epitomise elegance and beauty in the popular imagination, and against this glittering backdrop we may fairly set Richard Bolitho.

He possesses, too, heroic qualities. Physical courage is balanced by compassion, and he is unafraid of showing love for friends and dear companions or showing grief at their deaths. Tears are no weakness in this or any man, and he who is not frightened of showing them is perhaps the stronger for it.

He is a vulnerable man, never certain of the love of his men or his subordinates, always personally doubtful of his right to demand their obedience or their very lives; and strength and vulnerability can be a devastatingly attractive combination in any character. He is never confident in life, never arrogant, although he has sometimes behaved with a reckless and passionate abandon in his quest for it; and he has sometimes chosen unwisely. His

second marriage is a failure, and this too is evidence of his humanity: in attempting to find his dead wife in another woman, he makes a decision which is irrevocable, and which he will always regret. This marriage cannot be dissolved, and fate decrees that while trapped in it he is reunited with the woman he truly loves, and for whom he must now dare scandal and censure, and perhaps place his career in jeopardy. There is no possibility of divorce in Bolitho's England, except by Act of Parliament, and such a process is lengthy and expensive and, of course, very public.

Bolitho's sin is not his extra-marital relationship. Mistresses and lovers were common enough in his time as in ours, and often the influence they wielded behind the scenes at Court and in royal and government circles was powerful. His offense, in the eyes of society, is his public repudiation of his wife and his angry refusal to behave with hypocrisy: the breach is complete and irreparable and he will not lie about it. Nor will he abandon the woman he considers not so much his mistress but his wife in all but name; and he has certainly waited a long time for a love so richly passionate and so emotionally sustaining. It is an ideal of love, which many women may have found, and many wish to find.

And finally there are the qualities of the mature man, perhaps a more sombre, introspective Bolitho than the 'James Bond with barnacles', and indeed the author is sometimes accused of making him a melancholy fellow these days. The author has nothing to do with it: Bolitho has developed at his

own will and no one else's. Perhaps he has merely acquired the wisdom of maturity, the poignant appreciation of true values, the consciousness of the passage of time. He has fought the same enemy in the same seas for too many years, and the price is always too high, the friends too dear, the life too short and too precious. He reflects, possibly, the author's own maturity, but he speaks to all of us: the vulnerable lover, the cherished friend, the hero to be emulated, the essential gentleman, in whose flaws and qualities there is something of everyone.

## Part Three

### *Admirals All*

I am sometimes asked by readers of the Richard Bolitho stories about the significance, meaning and origin of the naval terms 'Admiral of the Red' or 'of the Blue' and so forth, and the importance of the different flags indicating senior officers' ships, from which signals would be made. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the manoeuvrability of large numbers of ships was limited and fleet actions were slow and difficult to control because of the simple sail-plan of the average man-of-war. It was often impossible for an admiral to maintain his line of battle when some of his captains were beyond visual contact.

The fleet was therefore divided into three squadrons, each with a coloured ensign of its own: the Red, the White and the Blue. Red, being the royal colour, was the senior, and the various

admirals were listed accordingly.

Even the ranks of the admirals were originally established in this way: the van squadron would be commanded by the Fleet's second-in-command, a vice-admiral, the main squadron would be under the Red ensign in overall command. The squadron bringing up the rear was under the flag of a rear-admiral. Later, with the introduction of more efficient sail-plans and above all the jib-sails, which enabled ships to pass through 'the eye of the wind' and change tack more easily, the ensign colours retained little significance.

In time of war it was more usual for the enemy's flags to determine under which colours the King's Navy would fight. During the American Revolution the main enemy fleets were French and Spanish, both of which flew white national colours. In the smoke and heat of close-action these enemy flags might easily have become confused with the British naval White Ensign, so during this period the Red Ensign was normally flown by the Royal Navy so that signals could be made and understood by other British ships no matter what the conditions at the time.

By the end of the eighteenth century both Spain and France had changed their naval ensigns and national flags. The King of Spain had chosen a flag with red and orange colouring, and the French the familiar tricolour, which is still worn on their naval vessels today. The first major sea battle to be fought solely under the White Ensign was Trafalgar in 1805. The white stood out clearly against the flags of the combined enemy fleets, and

Nelson himself was a Vice-Admiral of the White.

However, the old system endured until long after Nelson's death, until it was necessary to end the confusion created by the use of different ensigns on foreign stations and to unify the whole. The White Ensign then became the sole naval colour; but this did not occur until 1864, in Queen Victoria's expanding fleet. The titles for the various admirals remained also until that time.

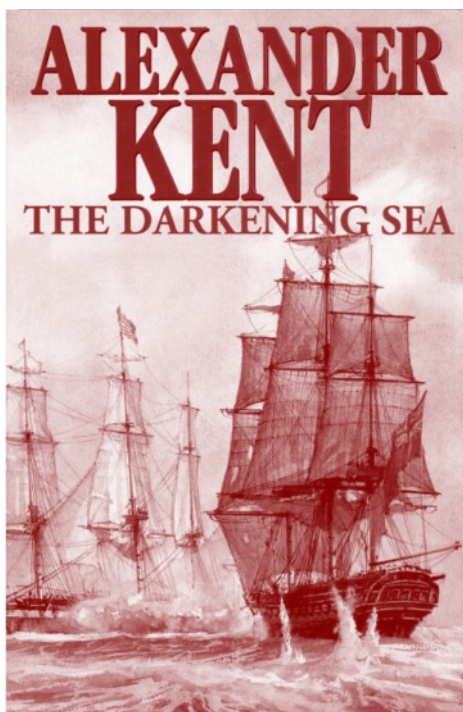
Their flags, too, displayed the ranks of the admirals who flew them simply by the manner in which they were flown. The admiral flew his from the mainmast truck, the vice-admiral from the foremast, and the rear-admiral hoisted his at the mizzen, in the same order of deployment as the original three squadrons.

It is more than likely that 'Our Dick', although an Admiral of the Red, will be sailing under the White Ensign on his next mission for King and Country. I am not at all sure what Allday will say about that.

## Part Four

### *The Darkening Sea*

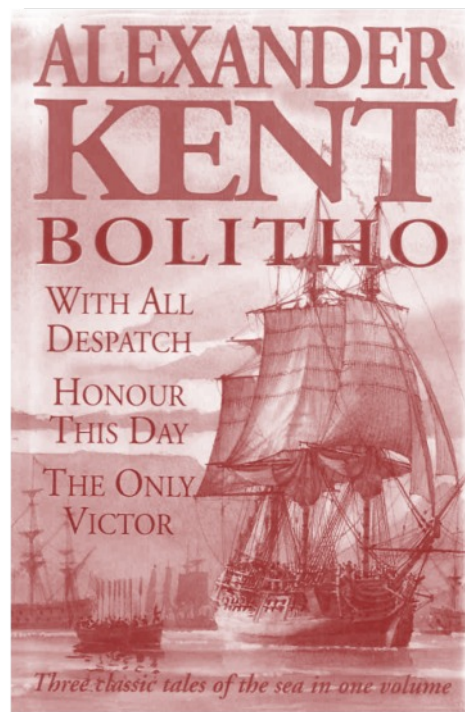
In this, the twenty-first Richard Bolitho novel and the chronological sequel to *Beyond the Reef*, Alexander Kent's immensely popular naval hero returns to England after the capture of Martinique, and finds a brief respite from war and politics in the arms of his mistress, Lady Catherine Somervell.



## Part Five

### *‘Bolitho’: Three Classic Tales of the Sea*

**W**ith *All Despatch*, *Honour This Day* and *The Only Victor* chart the career of the ever popular naval hero, Richard Bolitho, as he battles for King and Country, for his sailors who serve him loyally and for the woman he desperately loves but cannot marry, Lady Catherine Somervell.



But the affairs of nations allow little time for personal happiness, and to his surprise and dismay Bolitho is ordered almost immediately to the Indian Ocean, where the shadow of a new conflict already darkens the horizon as the old enemy, France, forges an uneasy alliance with America and threatens British trade routes.

Haunted by the deaths in their country's service of Nelson and Collingwood, and by his own vivid memories of shipwreck and tragedy, Bolitho is well aware of the price of admiralty, and for the first time considers the possibility of a life not only beyond the reef, but beyond the sea itself.