

British Naval Involvement in Brazil, 1807-1815

This article examines the role that the British Navy and, in particular, its admirals and officers played in ensuring a safe journey in 1807-08 to Brazil for the Portuguese royal family, and its support to the royal family in the years immediately after.¹

By Kenneth Light

Napoleonic Wars

In 1807 it cannot truthfully be said that Britain was winning the war against Napoleon Bonaparte.² At sea yes, for after the annihilation at Trafalgar (there is no better word for the results of this sea battle) of the French and Spanish fleets in 1805, the British Navy dominated the seas; not just those that bathed European shores but, with its enormous and well-trained and experienced fleets, all the oceans.

On land it was quite a different story. Britain had decided not to put an army on the Continent. If beaten, and the success of Bonaparte's armies was there for all to see and analyse, invasion of the 'Sceptred Isle' must inevitably follow. The strategy then consisted in supplying allies (the so-called Coalitions³) with funds and leaving the actual bloody fighting against the enemy (Bonaparte) up to them.

Anglo-Portuguese relations

Portugal was spared many of the convulsions taking place, largely as a result of its position at the extreme western end of Europe. As far as Britain was concerned, Portugal required differential treatment. One of the many reasons for this resulted from the closeness of the ties between the two countries after several centuries of trade and peace treaties. This became especially important after Bonaparte became determined, through the Berlin Decree of 1806, to cut off Britain's export trade and so weaken her ability to fund her allies and even her Navy. Portugal was the one place on the Continent that Britain could count on to secure a friendly foothold if she were to start a military campaign against Bonaparte. In addition, the Portuguese isle of Madeira would be a useful 'staging point' for her troops.

Portugal had a small but extremely active, efficient and well-disciplined Navy, a fact that had been recognized by Lord Nelson.⁴ Its ties with Britain's Navy were a two-way affair. During the previous half century more than forty British officers had, during peacetime, obtained permission from the Admiralty to serve in the Portuguese Navy; some even rising to the rank of admiral.

¹ The reader's attention is drawn to three previous articles by the same author:

a. *Britain and the Portuguese Navy, 1760-1810*. BHSP Annual Report 22, 1995.

<https://www.bhsportugal.org/library/articles/britain-and-the-portuguese-navy-1760-1810>

b. *The Portuguese and British Navies*. BHSP Annual Report 26, 1999.

<https://www.bhsportugal.org/library/articles/the-portuguese-and-british-navies>

c. *Arrival of the Portuguese Royal Family, Rio de Janeiro March 7, 1808*. BHSP Annual Report 27, 2000.

<https://www.bhsportugal.org/library/articles/arrival-of-the-portuguese-royal-family-rio-de-janeiro-march-7-1808>

² Napoleon Bonaparte, 1769-1821. Emperor of the French, 1804-1815

³ The first Coalition formed in 1793 consisted of the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Kingdom of Naples, Prussia, Spain and Great Britain. It lasted for four years. The second Coalition, that of 1798, lasted but a few months.

⁴ PEREIRA, Rodrigues, *Campanhas Navais 1793-1807 p. 21*, Lisbon, Tribuna da História, 2005. There are letters written by 'Bronté Nelson', as he usually signed himself after receiving the title of Duke of Bronté in 1798 from King Ferdinand, King of Two Sicilies, confirming his praise for the Portuguese navy. These letters, written to the Minister of the Navy, D. Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho, are dated 27 August 1799 and 2 January 1800.

Portuguese ships of the line had, on several occasions, fought as part of British Naval fleets, with commendable success. As a consequence, the possibility that the Portuguese fleet might fall to the French, should they invade Portugal (a highly probable event), was another worry. It would add a number of ships to the French fleet without a single shot being fired (at sea).

Commercial strategy, always present in British political thinking, was a major issue. During the previous century and a half Portugal's wealth had originated almost exclusively from Brazil. Brazilian gold, diamonds, hardwoods and sugar had made Portugal enviously rich. The richness that reached Portugal's shores from her colony – by law the export destination was restricted to the motherland and only on ships of her flag – would, to a great extent, serve to purchase goods (after the industrial revolution, manufactured goods) from Britain.

French invasion of Portugal

Events in 1807 moved at a rapid pace. There were threats to Portugal's sovereignty from both France and Spain in the earlier part of that year. In November, the two countries invaded Portugal, one of Bonaparte's first major errors. With supreme confidence for, after all, he was the all-powerful conqueror after so many victories, Napoleon announced (prematurely as it turned out) what he was about to do to the Bragança Family, the rulers of Portugal. This was the 'straw that broke the camel's back'; his threats enabled the Prince Regent D. João,⁵ a correct and religious man, to satisfy himself before God and his people that the moment had come to leave Portugal. This was not to abandon his people: quite the contrary, D. João saw the move as saving his country and his family from the all-embracing claws of the 'tyrant'.



D. João VI and Queen Carlota

In this he was successful (especially when compared to his neighbour, Spain). In recent years his decision has led historians, in a most positive way, to reappraise his character, personality and intelligence. Today he is seen in a quite different light; unthinkable a few years ago. In October 1807, the Prince Regent called on the British Navy through a 'Convention', to stand by and, if

⁵ D. João VI, 1767-1826. Prince Regent of Portugal, 1799-1815, then Prince Regent of the Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves until the death of his mother, D. Maria I, 1734-1816, when he became king.

needed, to help him transport his court and capital to Rio de Janeiro.⁶ In ordinary circumstances, Portugal was quite capable of looking after herself but, with her fighting ships laden with passengers, together with their luggage, state archives, church plate and carriages, they would become ‘transport’ rather than ‘fighting ships’.

Rear Admiral Sir William Sidney Smith⁷

In Britain, the Admiralty chose Rear-admiral of the blue, Sir William Sidney Smith, to lead the squadron that would protect Portugal’s coastline and the voyage to Brazil, should it take place. Standing off the Tagus in November 1807, the squadron under his command had in fact a greater number of guns (for that is how the power of a squadron/fleet was judged) than the entire Portuguese fleet preparing for its voyage to Brazil. The Admiralty judged that this had to be the case for, if necessity arose, the Portuguese fleet would have to be taken to Britain in custody until the end of the war or even, in extreme circumstances, destroyed.



Sir Sidney Smith

Sir Sidney Smith was a singular figure. Extremely unpopular because of his character, he was nevertheless a national hero in Britain; arguably as great a hero as Admiral Nelson prior to Trafalgar. In 1793, on hearing of the resumption of the Napoleonic Wars and wishing to participate, he started his return to Britain from Turkey (he was there because he was acting on his own as a spy). Acquiring with his own money a small vessel, the *Swallow*, he set sail back to Britain. When Smith reached Toulon, Admiral Hood (who knew him well from past battles), ordered him to command an incursion by a small number of British naval ships into that French port. Although not at that moment ‘officially’ a naval officer, he sailed past the forts and destroyed 10 French line-of-battle ships, 2 frigates and 2 corvettes. It was the largest number of vessels that had, up to that time, been destroyed at any British Naval engagement.

⁶ Convention between Portugal and England, signed on 22 October 1807. Public Records Office/Foreign Office 94/163.

⁷ Sir William Sidney Smith, 1764-1840. BARROW, John, *The Life and Correspondence of Admiral Sir William Sidney Smith G.C.B.* London: Richard Bentley, 1848. 2v. RUSSEL, E. F. L. *Knight of the Sword: Sir W. S. Smith.* London, Victor Gollancz, 1964. POCOCK, Thomas *A Thirst for Glory: The Life of Admiral Sir Sidney Smith,* London: Aurum Press, 1996.

In 1798, whilst still a captain, Sidney Smith defeated Bonaparte on land. He was the first British officer to do so! Bonaparte's transport ships, having been destroyed by Nelson at the battle of Abukir Bay, forced him to march his men (via Turkey, Persia and [today] Pakistan) to India; a sea route was out of the question. Conquering India and her wealth (in the hands of Britain) had been one of his principal objectives in invading Egypt. At Acre (today near the frontier between Israel and Lebanon), he was stopped by Smith and, after a siege of 43 days, Bonaparte gave up. His much-depleted troops struggled back to Egypt and never again recovered to make another attempt.

In 1806, under Lord Collingwood,⁸ the successor to Nelson, Smith was given the command of the inshore squadron in the Mediterranean, with special responsibility for Sicily. The Bourbon King, Ferdinand IV,⁹ and his wife Queen Maria Carolina (sister of Marie Antoinette who was beheaded in Paris) were under considerable pressure from Bonaparte's troops. Their Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was made up of an area on the Italian mainland, south of Naples, and the island of Sicily. The mainland portion of the kingdom had been invaded and Joseph, Bonaparte's brother, was preparing to be crowned King of Naples. British troops, aided by Sicilians and Corsicans, were trying to prevent the invasion of the island.

King Ferdinand named Sidney Smith as Viceroy of Calabria and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He thus had political and military responsibilities, in addition to those of a rear admiral. Contrary to the opinion of British generals, but with the encouragement and support of Queen Caroline, Smith decided to attack the mainland. His opinion was that an attack on the continent was the best way to defend Sicily. He started by taking the Isle of Capri, next-door to Naples. Then, embarking 5,000 British troops, from the island's garrison, together with Corsican irregulars, he landed them in Calabria, where the valley (Vale) of the Maida met the sea. The Calabrese Mountain fighters, the *Massi*, were waiting to help them. The battle produced yet another British victory and, incidentally, the name of a London district and underground station!

During his lifetime, Sidney Smith was to receive many decorations. These were always added to his coat-of-arms, which became so complex that it was used by an engraver to publicize his work!

So, this then was the profile of the naval officer chosen to coordinate Britain's help in transferring the Portuguese Royal family to Brazil. On 29 November 1807, the Portuguese Naval fleet of some 18 vessels (on board the *Príncipe Real*, Queen D. Maria I, Prince Regent D. João and his sons), together with some 25 merchant vessels, sailed for Brazil. Smith was commodore of the four escorting ships, although he did not sail with them. Graham Moore was captain of HMS *Marlborough*, Thomas Western, captain of HMS *London*, James Walker, Captain of HMS *Bedford* and R. Lee, captain of HMS *Monarch*.

Arrival in Rio de Janeiro

Accounts of the preparations for and details of this voyage exist. The safe arrival in Salvador and the transfer to Rio de Janeiro has been researched, analysed, written and published.¹⁰ The crossing was successful: all the naval, merchant and escorting ships arrived safely at their destination on 7

⁸ Vice-admiral of the red, Cuthbert Collingwood, 1748-1810, 1st Baron Collingwood.

⁹ King Ferdinand, 1751-1825. King of Naples as Ferdinand IV, 1759-1806; then as Ferdinand I, King of the Two Sicilies, 1816-1825.

¹⁰ LIGHT, Kenneth H., *The Saving of an Empire: The Journey of Portugal's Court and Capital to Brazil, 1808*. Ely, Cambridgeshire, Melrose Books, 2009.

March 1808. The arrival in Rio de Janeiro has been faithfully reproduced in an oil painting by the marine artist Geoff Hunt, PPRSMA, which was completed in 1999.



Arrival of the Royal Family in Rio de Janeiro, by Geoff Hunt, RSMA

On 9 March 1808, HM Ship *Surveillance*, captained by Sir George Collier, arrived at Rio, carrying Francis Hill Esq., Secretary of Legation and Chargé d’Affaires; giving continuity to British diplomatic representation. Unlike British vessels in the harbour (which were showing a jack surrounded by blue on their mizzen [third] mast, announcing to the world that they were part of a squadron under a Rear-admiral of the blue), she was flying the ensign from her foremast and it was the jack surrounded by red. The squadron blockading Lisbon, of which this ship formed part, was now under the command of Vice-admiral of the red, Sir Charles Cotton (1753-1812).

His Britannic Majesty’s South American Station

Sidney Smith had been sent by the Admiralty to the Mediterranean to ‘discover’ the whereabouts of the French fleet that had managed to escape from the blockade at Rochefort. However, on 29 February 1808, Smith was ordered to Rio. He was to take under his command those ships off that coast and, most importantly, was appointed the first Commander-in-Chief of the newly created His Britannic Majesty’s South American Station. Meanwhile, in Brazil, the Prince Regent was fretful that the French Rochefort squadron might attack his coastline; at his request those British ships in Rio harbour set off to cruise as far as Salvador. No enemy in sight, they returned on 8 May. A few days later HM Corvette *Confiance*, under Captain James Lucas Yeo, arrived, followed, a week later, by HMS *Foudroyant*, with Captain N. Thompson bringing Smith to take up his command. He was followed, in July 1808, by Lord Strangford, who had been Minister to the Court of Portugal when preparations were being made for the King’s departure from Lisbon.

The Prince Regent, pleased by his safe voyage to Rio, decided to show his gratitude to the British officers. As existing decorations were religious and so were restricted to Catholics, an old-

established order, that of the Tower and Sword, was revived and Sidney Smith was made a Knight Grand Cross. In addition, the Prince Regent presented him with the standard of Portugal to be added to his coat-of-arms.

During his short period in Rio (he left on 21 June 1809), Smith spent a great deal of his time supporting the ambitious designs of the Prince Regent's wife, Princess Carlota Joaquina,¹¹ in reclaiming Argentina for the Spanish crown; she hoped to become a 'Princess Regent' of that nation. However, Sidney Smith's numerous indiscretions, his tendency to act on his own initiative without consultation, his abrasive personality, and his constant conflict with Lord Strangford made it impossible for him to continue and he was recalled. He went on to play an important role in organising the treatment of the wounded of the Battle of Waterloo, before becoming a prominent anti-slavery campaigner. He died in Paris in 1840 and was buried in the *Père Lachaise* cemetery.

Rear Admiral the Hon. Michael de Courcy¹²

Michael de Courcy became the second Commander-in-Chief of His Britannic Majesty's South American Station. Son of an ancient Irish family – his father was the 18th Baron Kingsale – his career in the Navy had been relatively quiet when compared to that of Sir Sidney Smith. He was best known for commanding the naval force that covered the escape of Sir Thomas Moore's troops at La Coruña in Northern Spain in January 1809, during the Peninsular War.

Taking office on 18 May 1809, his first mission, although important, was not very warlike: arranging transportation of 50,000 carats of diamonds to England. A month after his arrival, he was cruising with his squadron off the Rio de la Plata searching for French warships. Not sighting any and with no useful information available he would shortly return to Rio. His correspondence to and from the Admiralty in London at that time deals, almost exclusively, with problems relating to Argentina and Uruguay. The greatly increased trade between Britain and South America is reflected in Courcy's request that additional ships should be sent out, as merchants would need their services as escorts.

His relations with Strangford (like himself also of Irish nobility) would appear to have been much better than had been the case with Sidney Smith. In March 1810, Strangford asked him for transport to take a treaty that he had negotiated with the Prince Regent. Courcy provided a small vessel the *Steady*, captained by Lieutenant Stow. The final version of the 'Strangford Treaty', unthinkable today for its numerous and exclusive advantages for Britain and even an invasion of Portugal's sovereignty, would later be much criticised.¹³

The Prince Regent continued to be uneasy about the French squadron that was still at large and might suddenly appear. He considered that the port of Bahia was, because of its geographical formation, very vulnerable. Once again, the British squadron, accompanied by two Portuguese ships-of-the-line set sail for Bahia, only to return without any encounter or even news (intelligence as it was then called). In May 1812, Courcy reported that two Portuguese sloops of war, with two troop-ships able to accommodate a thousand men, were being prepared to sail to Maldonado

¹¹ D. Carlota Joaquina, 1775-1830. Eldest child of the Spanish King Carlos IV.

¹² Admiral of the blue the Hon. Sir Michael de Courcy, 1811-1881

¹³ The treaty provided for the importation of British manufactures into Brazil and the exportation of Brazilian agricultural produce to Great Britain; also, British naval vessels were allowed to be resupplied in Brazilian ports; British Protestants were given freedom of worship in Brazil and cases involving British residents in Brazil were to be tried only before judges appointed by the British crown. The treaty gave Britain the sole right to these commercial privileges in Brazil.

(Uruguay). However, he was unsure whether they were going to disembark near that port or help Brazilians to reach Porto Alegre. By July, an agreement had been reached with Buenos Aires and the idea of sending troops had been abandoned. In the same despatch he mentioned that some traders in Bahia were furious because of the capture by British warships of some of their vessels off the coast of Africa. These, almost certainly, would have been slave traders.

Courcy returned home in 1812, after being invested with the Order of the Tower and Sword by the Prince Regent. In July 1810 he had been promoted to vice-admiral, an automatic promotion through seniority. Later, in July 1821, he would achieve the rank of admiral of the blue. He died in 1824.

Rear Admiral Manley Dixon¹⁴

Courcy's replacement was Sir Manley Dixon (1757-1837), who arrived in Brazil in 1812 and stayed until the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. He was appointed Vice-admiral in December 1813. His son, Manley Hall Dixon, captained his flagship, the HMS *Montagu*. In 1814, at the time reporting to Manley Dixon, the HMS *Phoebe* and the HMS *Isaac Todd* captured the USS *Essex* off Valparaiso in Chile, an action undertaken in connection with the 1812-1815 war between Britain and the USA that had its origins in British attempts to cut off Napoleon from supplies from the USA. Dixon was made a full Admiral in 1825. He died in 1837.

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¹⁴ Admiral Sir Manley Dixon, 1757-1837