Regency masculinity? The place of Napoleonic War veterans in the history of masculinities

Dr Karen Downing
Australian National University

Please note: This presentation has been created to be read in conjunction with a visual presentation. ◆ indicates the next 'slide' in the presentation.

◆ *Persuasion,* Jane Austen's last completed book, is different from her previous novels in that it recognizably addresses issues of the time in which the story is set. Significantly, Austen employs navy men and their wives as figures of social change and Austen's own younger brothers, Francis and Charles, had lifelong careers in the navy.[1] Naval officers were glamorous figures of the Regency period, almost as familiar to us now as the Regency dandy, epitomised by George 'Beau' Brummell – and they, and their rank-and-file subordinates, are far more useful to us in understanding changes in ideals and representations of manliness between Georgian and Victorian Britain.

◆ Britain's hard won victory over the French seemingly laid to rest eighteenth-century fears about the softening effects of politeness, luxury and commerce on men. The rift between military manliness and sensibility appeared reconciled in the heroes of Trafalgar and Waterloo, who saw themselves as heirs to medieval knights and their chivalric code, with its association of love of women with love of war, of tenderness with ferocity, that overcame anxieties about politeness, especially its uneasy relationship to authenticity and its association with effeminacy.[2]

The veterans of the Napoleonic wars are, therefore, complex male figures that help illuminate the shift from vying notions of manliness of the Georgian era – the conspicuous consumerism of the city aristocracy, the benevolent patriarchy of the country gentlemen, the virtuousness of the evangelizing middling sort, the aggressive mercantilism of merchants, the frank fearlessness of the lower orders – to more commonly shared ideals of patriotism, independence, discipline, restraint on physical aggression, and dedication to family pursuits, which were embodied in the middle-

---

[1] Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (Oxford University Press, 2008 (1818), viii, ix, x, xvi, 223.

[2] Adam Nicolson, *Men of Honour: Trafalgar and the Making of the English Hero*, Harper Perennial, London, 2006, 122, 320, 328.

class Victorian patriarch of home, business and politics.[3] They also help explain the continuing appeal of more militaristic forms of manliness during this period of peace.

♦ My paper today looks at just a a couple of the inter-related circumstances through which this shift was produced. First is the role of the navy as an effective mechanism of social mobility that gave men of the middling classes increased aspirations to independence and those of the lower classes increased expectations for political participation. The numbers of men involved in the Napoleonic wars made it difficult to ignore the link between military contribution and the franchise. Second is various effects of demobilisation which necessarily saw large numbers of men with naval training involved in significant changes in society at home: they filled posts in an expanding bureaucracy and emerging occupations; they figured in the political agitation and increased criminal activity that fueled moves for the establishment of centralized police forces; and they also filled the ranks of those forces.

♦ Much of my account does include soldiers and the army as much as sailors and the navy, but I think we have already seen at this conference the tremendous sway that naval figures had in visual and material culture. It was with maritime narratives that the British organised – economically, politically and culturally – their seaborne empire,[4] and in this expanding empire, being 'at sea' was for many men, in the words of a popular song, 'where I should ever be'.[5]

The question mark in the title of this paper indicates a point that I will come to at the end: is there actually anything to be gained by using a concept such as 'Regency' masculinity?

♦ Much of the historiography of these early decades of the nineteenth century depicts the Regency as a period of transition between an old England of predominantly rural attitudes, and a new England of accelerating industrialisation; or as a 'pre-modern plateau' of aesthetic style and taste and tolerant sexuality before the onset of the moral and social seriousness of the Victorian period; or as GM Young colourfully described it in the 1940s, as moving out of the age of humbug into the age of humdrum.[6] Words like 'disorder', 'discontent' and 'uncertainty' are used. And 1815 is treated like some pivot point in a seemingly discernible period between around the 1780s to the

---

[3] John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, Yale University Press, London, 1999, 7; John Tosh, 'Domesticity and manliness in the Victorian middle class: The family of Edward White Benson', in Michael Roper and John Tosh (eds), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, Routledge, London, 1991, 46; John Tosh, 'Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800-1914', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44 330-342, April, 2005, 331.

[4] John R Gillis, 'Island Sojourns', *Geographical Review*, vol. 97 (2), April, 2007, 281.

[5] The Sea! the Sea! the open Sea!
The blue, the fresh, the ever free;
Without a mark, without a bound,
It runneth the earth's wide regions round.
It plays with the clouds, – it mocks the skies,
Or like a cradled creature lies.
I'm on the Sea! – I'm on the Sea!
I am where I should ever be;
Five Popular Songs: viz. By the Side of the Stream. Beautiful Kate. Draw the Sword, Scotland. Last Rose of Summer, and The Sea. c1840s (undated)

[6] GM Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age*, c1949, 48.

1860s variously described as an age of 'reform', or of 'improvement' or of the 'forging of the modern state'.[7]

In such works, the eighteenth century might last until 1815, but the nineteenth often doesn't begin until 1830 and the events of the period we label the Regency might be categorized as belonging to one century or the other, or to neither. RJ White finds in the panoply of characters involved in political agitation between Waterloo and Peterloo, a 'strange juxtaposition of the old world and the new, within the lifetime of these men'.[8] Biographers of men of the period struggle to articulate this juxtaposition, so that John George Lambton, born in 1792, is described as 'essentially… an eighteenth-century figure' who died without having adjusted to the Victorian world.[9] As John Tosh has pointed out, 'At the level of popular stereotype, no greater contrast could be imagined than that between the uninhibited "Georgian" libertine and his sober frock-coated "Victorian" grandson.'[10]

Historians of masculinity tend to agree that the early nineteenth century saw a change in masculine ideals but there is less agreement about what these ideals were.

As Michèle Cohen observes, this is partly because historians consider different versions of eighteenth-century masculinity and, therefore, identify different changes.[11] John Tosh contends that the transformation between Georgian and Victorian society was evidenced in a sharper distinction between 'manliness' and 'gentlemanliness,' where 'gentleman' continued to invoke refinement and sociability, and 'manliness' was more about rugged individualism, the style of masculinity that gained in social and political weight during the nineteenth century.[12] Louise Carter finds that debates surrounding the Queen Caroline Affair support the argument that a new model of masculinity was in ascendancy, and that this model required attention to domestic arrangements, even for men in positions of public prominence.'[13] Meanwhile, William Stafford's investigation of the *Gentleman's Magazine* leads him to conclude that there was no disappearance of the man of sensibility, with a concurrent onset of reserve and taciturnity, or a shift from a 'social' to an 'individualistic self;' that there was no transformation of masculinity that some historians have proposed.[14] And Karen Harvey has suggested that the military contexts in which some men's masculinity was forged suggest limits to the hegemony of politeness during this period.[15]

---

[7] For example: David Eastwood, 'The Age of Uncertainty: Britain in the Early-Nineteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 8, 1998, 91-11 ; RJ White, *Waterloo to Peterloo*, Peregrine Books, 1968 ; xiii; 343; Deidre Shauna Lynch, 'Introduction', Austen, *Persuasion*, x.

[8] White, *Waterloo to Peterloo*, 88.

[9] Ged Martin, 'Lambton, John George , first earl of Durham (1792–1840)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/view/article/15947, accessed 15 Sept 2009]

[10] Tosh, 'The Old Adam and the New Man: Emerging Themes in the History of English Masculinities, 1750–1850', in *Manliness and Masculinities*, 62.

[11] Cohen, 'Manners' Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750-1830', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, April 2005, 312.

[12] Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 86.

[13] Louise Carter, 'British Masculinities on Trial in the Queen Caroline Affair of 1820', *Gender & History*, vol. 20 (2), August, 2008, 266.

[14] William Stafford, 'Gentlemanly Masculinities as Represented by the Late Georgian *Gentleman's Magazine*', *History*, vol. 93 (309), January 2008, 68.

[15] Karen Harvey, 'The History of Masculinity, circa 1650-1800', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44, April, 2005, 308.

Joanne Begiato considers the somatic experiences of men, of embodied manliness, to deliberately span 'conventionally discrete periods',[16] and Kevin Waite approaches the problem of periodization by focussing on the role of sport and the ideology of education in Napoleonic-era public schools. Here he finds more continuty than change: many of the qualities celebrated in late Victorian schoolboys – like self-reliance, courage, fortitude, and loyalty – were also valued during the Georgian era.[17]

Whether adhering to accepted periodizations or trying to overcome them, historians of masculinities find it difficult to pin down exactly what was going on.

♦ One thing we can say with some certainty about the period is that military service was common.

If men were not like Austen's younger brothers, with their lifelong naval careers, they were like her brother Henry who was, for a brief period in the 1790s, a lieutenant in the Oxford Militia, and later an agent and banker.[18]

After 1789 the British armed forces grew faster than any other European power.[19] During the Napoleonic wars, the royal Navy reached its peak at around 140,000 men. To appreciate the scale of that mobilization, says Isaac Land, we need to know that in this same time period a town of just 10,000 people was considered substantial. London was the exception at just over one million, but only a few other cities in the British Isles had more than 50,000 inhabitants.[20] Another way to appreciate the scale of mobilization is in Margarette Lincoln's statistic that by 1803 over one in five of the population of Britain capable of bearing arms were engaged in some form of military service.[21]

It simply was not feasible that the leaders of such huge forces would all come from elite classes. One very detailed analysis of army promotions and appointments during the Peninsular War showed that the practice of purchase played no part in four out of five appointments and promotions, and patronage played an even smaller role.[22] The navy too gave men of humble origins the means to advance in society. It was one of few professions in which a man without an independent income could not only maintain himself as a gentleman but also aspire to a coat of arms. During wartime especially, it was a prime means of social mobility: men moved up the ranks more quickly as officers fell in battle, and captured enemy prizes became the capital with which to purchase land and independence.[23] Sir Walter Elliot, in *Persuasion*, found such aspirations

[16] Joanne Begiato, 'Between Poise and Power: Embodied Manliness in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century British Culture', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 26, 2016, 130.

[17] Kevin Waite, 'Beating Napoleon at Eton: Violence, Sport and Manliness in England's Public Schools, 1783–1815', *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 11 (3), 2014, 419-420.

[18] Austen, *Persuasion*, 223

[19] Stefan Dudink and Karen Hagemann, 'Masculinities in politics and war in the age of democratic revolutions, 1750-1850', in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2004,14.

[20] Isaac Land, War, *Nationalism, and the British Sailor, 1750-1850*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009, 1

[21] Margarette Lincoln, *Representing the Royal Navy: British Sea Power, 1750-1815*, Ashgate, Aldershot, England, 2002, 4.

[22] Michael Glover, 'Purchase, Patronage and Promotion in the Army at the time of the Peninsula War. Part I. First Commissions', *The Army Quarterly and Defence Journal*, vol. 103 (2), January, 1973, 211, 215.

[23] Lincoln, *Representing the Royal Navy*, 3, 4, 36.

offensive: the Royal navy, he observed, offered 'the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction.'[24] But men of obscure birth took the opportunity: Nelson, the son of a country parson was a case in point.

Naval men from the labouring classes enjoyed a related benefit. A post-war pension liberated them from some of the pressure of the quest for work. Their choice of casual employment rather than steady labour irked employers: they saw it as a conditioning effect of a sailor's wandering life. But men took employment as needed or available, not so much to maximize earnings as to maintain some autonomy in earning a living.[25]

Social mobility and claims to independence were not the only wartime legacies. Reforms, in the 1750s, that required all fit adult men to serve had effectively equated citizenship with all men. This was a significant conceptual change for a political tradition that had formerly conferred full membership of the nation only on possessors of land and rank.[26] During the decades of the French and Napoleonic wars, the authorities were aware of the risks of calling on men from all classes, political backgrounds, regions, and religious denominations to defend the country. They knew that demands for political rights were likely to follow, which they did.[27] And although the Reform Act of 1832 gave limited extension to the franchise, it paved the way for universal male suffrage in 1884.

♦ The sheer number of men serving during the Napoleonic wars made veterans a significant presence in home society. Almost a third of a million discharged sailors and soldiers returned home after 1815.[28] War-ravaged Europe was not spending money on foreign goods and the inflated British economy had collapsed. National debt had increased exponentially[29] and economic depression lasted until 1821. Returning sailors and soldiers increased the pressure on an already pressured labour market and added pensions and half-pay provisions to the state's financial burdens.[30] Some sailors found employment in the mercantile marine or the fishing fleet, but many more did not and officers as well as seamen suffered when the greater part of the fleet was laid up for almost a generation.[31]

The state did derive some advantage from this situation: as the government extended its regulative powers they had no difficulty finding men used to bureaucratic procedure and the exercise of authority. The Colonial Office, for example, filled important administrative positions in the outposts of empire with senior service officers, men who had experience of life abroad and whose pensions could be set off against their salaries. The small corps of emigration officers built up in the 1830s was drawn from naval lieutenants: they were men who knew their way around ships, were not overawed by merchant ships' captains, and were also economical to employ.[32] Naval men were

---

[24] Austen, *Persuasion*, 22.

[25] JE Cookson, 'Early Nineteenth-Century Scottish Military Pensioners as Homecoming Soldiers', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 52 (2), 2009, 334, 337; N Gash, 'After Waterloo: British Society and the Legacy of the Napoleonic Wars', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 28, 1978, 145-152.

[26] Matthew McCormack, 'The New Militia: War, Politics and Gender in 1750s Britain', *Gender & History*, vol. 19 (3), November, 2007, 497.

[27] Dudink and Hagemann, 'Masculinities in Politics and War', 14.

[28] 300,000 of them in 1816 and another 32,000 in 1817.

[29] From £238 million in 1793 to £902 million in 1816.

[30] Gash, 'After Waterloo', 145-152.

[31] EL Woodward, *The Age of Reform, 1815-1870*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1946 (1938), 261-262.

[32] Gash, 'After Waterloo', 149.

similarly useful in the administration and management of the early railroads where their time-keeping expertise and skill in holding workers to a tight schedule were valued.[33]

Of less benefit to the state was demobilized service men's presence in post-Waterloo political agitation which influenced the forms which that unrest took.[34] Drilling was the radicals' response to taunts that they were no more than a ragged mob. To show that they could conduct themselves with order, men spent summer evenings learning how to march in rank and wheel in column, under the instruction of ex-military men.[35]

A significant feature of this political agitation was the use of military force to quell the disturbances. Despite the movement of regular militia, troops and even ships around the countryside wherever restlessness was experienced,[36] the Home Office was regularly asked to provide stronger military protection.[37] These calls highlighted the difficulties that local authorities faced in keeping law and order in a changing society, and added weight to calls for an enlarged and centralised police force.[38] The English gentry had long resisted the creation of a professional police system – they associated the prospect with tyranny and curtailment of 'manly' independence[39] – and parliamentary committees in 1816, 1818 and 1822 rejected a centralised force as 'incompatible with British liberty'.[40]

A perceived increase in crime, however, added further weight to calls for a professional force. Returned service men were implicated in this increase. Naval life was seen as making men restless, improvident, and dissolute and thus prone to crime. This was the thrust of much, though not unanimous, evidence to the House of Commons in reports on corn laws, poor laws, the state of the police, and so forth.[41]

Whether there was an actual increase in crime is an open question but there was certainly a growing legal intolerance of interpersonal violence which in eighteenth-century English criminal law had not been of much concern, either in principal or in practice. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, however, there was an increase in the way crimes against the person were defined and prosecuted and the severity of the punishment began to reflect the degree of violence

---

[33] Isaac Land, 2009, 137.

[34] Gash, 'After Waterloo', 150-151.

[35] White, *Waterloo to Peterloo*, 190; 108; 553-554

[36] For example: to Nottingham in 1811; to Mansfield, Leeds, Huddersfield and Sheffield in 1812; and to Hull, Newcastle, and the South Shields area in 1815. Troops were used in Staffordshire in 1815, in East Anglia and Spa Fields in 1816, in Pentridge in 1817, in St Peter's Field, Manchester in 1819 and at Huddersfield again in 1820. Frank Ongley Darvall, *Popular Disturbances and Public Order in Regency England*, Oxford University Press, London, 1934, 66, 95, 100, 118, 152, 260; Gash, 'After Waterloo', 151.

[37] White, *Waterloo to Peterloo*,107-108.

[38] Darvall, *Popular Disturbances*, 247-248, 273, 250.

[39] GJ Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, 80.

[40] TA Critchley, *A History of Police in England and Wales*, Patterson Smith, Montclair, New Jersey, 1972, 46.

[41] For example: Reports respecting grain, and the Corn Laws: viz: first and second reports from the Lords Committees, appointed to enquire into the state of the growth, commerce, and consumption of grain, and all laws relating thereto;--to whom were referred the several petitions, presented to the House this session, respecting the Corn Laws, 25 July 1814; Report from the Committee on the State of the Police of the Metropolis; with, the minutes of evidence taken before the committee; and, an appendix of sundry papers, 1816; Report from the Select Committee on the Poor Laws: with the minutes of evidence taken before the committee; and an appendix, 1817; Minutes of evidence taken before the committee appointed to consider of the several petitions relating to ribbon weavers, 1818; House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 'problems with returned soldiers', http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk ; 320.

used. These changes resulted in an eight-fold increase in the prosecution of men between 1805 and 1842.[42]

Peel was finally successful with his Metropolitan Police Bill in April 1829 and by May 1830, the Metropolitan Police was a force of 3300, as compared to the 450 full-time officers in London two years earlier. Recruiting policy targeted returned service men and Peel's Metropolitan Police could scarcely have come into existence without them.[43]

Although there had been three-quarters of a century of suspicion and hostility towards the whole idea of professional police, the Act was passed without opposition and scarcely any debate.[44] This was very little fanfare for a move with profound consequences for men because the replacement of the citizen-soldier with a paid soldiery for maintaining internal law along with the increasing professionalization of military men in a reduced defence force, signaled a slowing of the mobility of men's occupations.[45]

Occupation as a more fixed status, and as a marker of particular forms of masculinity, became a feature of Victorian society as middle-class wives were excluded from family businesses and the wives of better-paid working-class men were similarly confined to domestic duties. These moves were reflected in, and reinforced by, the state's census, which in 1801 roughly categorized families as either agricultural or in 'trade manufacture' but in 1831 the category of families was abandoned and adult males were divided into nine major occupational groups. Although this change was done with uneasiness, by 1851 the census had confirmed the sexual division of labour and contributed to the equation of masculine identity with an occupation.[46]

♦ That men had less opportunity for military service did not reduce the appeal of military manliness. The presence of Napoleonic veterans only helped the endurance of its appeal and apparent relevance at all levels of society. In politics, Nelson did not live to take part but men such as Wellington and Liverpool prolonged the state's concern with a warlike foreign policy past its usefulness.[47] In communities, veterans were 'characters' who turned up in published local histories, their service records re-told in newspaper obituaries.[48] In visual and material culture, the figure of the sailor was employed to embody nation and empire and Mary Conley and Joanne Begiato have described the 'constitutive power' of this figure, its role in democratising elite concepts of manliness.[49] I think that further work on the place of naval service in family stories, on the transmission of values and ideals across generations, would improve our understanding of this

---

[42] Martin J Wiener, 'The Victorian Criminilization of Men', in Peter Spierenburg (ed), *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Modern Europe and America*, Ohio State University, Ohio, 1998, 202-203, 209.

[43] Gash, 'After Waterloo', 150.

[44] Critchley, *A History of Police in England and Wales,* 49-50

[45] Mary Conley, for example, discusses the effects of technology and requirement for a more skilled less transient workforce in *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870-1918*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2009.

[46] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, Routledge, London, 2002, 229-271; Tosh, 'Masculinities in an Industrializing Society', 332.

[47] Benjamin Robert Haydon reflected in 1830, 'The military vigour, the despotic feeling engendered by twenty-five years of furious war, rendered them unfit, perhaps, to guide the domestic policy of the country.' Quoted in White, *Waterloo to Peterloo*, 105-106.

[48] Cookson, 'Early Nineteenth-Century Scottish Military Pensioners', 337.

[49] Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack*; Joanne Begiato, 'Tears and the manly sailor in England, 1760–1860', *Journal for Maritime Research*, vol. 17 (2), 2015, 118.

democratisation – memories like Jack Lawson's with which Joanne ended her keynote yesterday. I suspect that the transformative aspects of naval service that I have sketched today, and that Catriona Kennedy and Neil Ramsay have found in sailors' memoirs, contributed to the elevation of the traits of naval manliness as ideals. And these ideals were, perhaps, less contested because there were fewer men with first-hand knowledge of the realities of miltary service and war. Family biographies of seamen whose sons and grandsons were colonial administrators, public servants, and captains of and labour for industry, have yet to be adequately incorporated into our understanding of masculinities during the nineteenth century.

♦ All this leads me to the question of whether the concept of 'Regency' masculinity is actually useful? The period is, after all, less than twenty years long – a generation, at a stretch. It is doubtful that the men living through it would have picked out those particular years as a distinctive period of their lives except to say it was their childhood or coming of age, their adulthood, or their old age. Yet, biographers struggle with the men who lived through this time, trying to fit them into either the eighteenth century or the nineteenth century and finding in their subjects a similar struggle. Perhaps what we are seeing here is the incoherence of male subjectivity over a man's lifetime. Any semblance of 'new' formations of manliness are never wholly assimilated by individuals. Rather, they are in constant negotiation between material circumstances and existing social and cultural scripts, and those existing scripts reflect life stage as much as class, racial and religious factors. Perhaps the value in considering 'Regency' masculinity is not in the label but in the requirement that we focus on the fine-grain detail that can surface during such a short time period. As Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard have suggested, '[t]he close analysis of individual experience may well provide the clearest evidence of the subtleties of change'.[50]

---

[50] Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard, 'What Have Historians Done with Masculinity? Reflections on Five Centuries of British History, circa 1500-1950', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44 (2), 2005, 280.