

# Forced to go to sea

**Roy and Lesley Adkins** look at a book on the practice of naval impressment in Georgian Britain

## The Press Gang by Nicholas Rogers

Continuum, 168 pages, £60 hb, £17.99 pb

**T**HE MAIN METHOD of recruitment for the Royal Navy in the Georgian era was impressment – the seizing of men between the ages of 18 and 55 by press gangs based around the coast, as well as coming ashore from warships, or snatching men from merchant ships on the high seas and in overseas ports. The last major study was *The Press-Gang Afloat and Ashore* by JR Hutchinson (1913, reprinted Dodo Press, 2008).

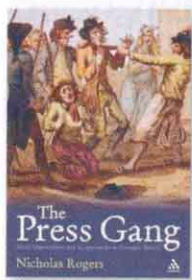
The author of this new book, a professor of history at York University, Toronto, takes issue with those naval historians (especially his near namesake NAM Rodger) who deal with impressment primarily as a manning problem. Nicholas Rogers is a social historian who deftly demolishes preconceptions about 18th-century impressment, using a mass of new evidence from Admiralty records and contemporary newspapers and pamphlets.

He believes that “naval historians find the issue of impressment something of an embarrassment” and discusses how press gangs were supposed to operate within the law and how citizens could use the law to protect themselves. The poor generally had no legal redress, though they were exempt from impressment if sued for debts of £20 or more, leading to innumerable fictitious actions. From 1803 impressment could be avoided by joining a militia called the sea-fencibles, which Rogers describes as “a perfect scam” and not a sign of patriotism.

Impressment was frequently a violent process, both in the way that press gangs treated potential recruits and in the opposition to the gangs.



*The Liberty of the Subject* by James Gillray, 1779, shows a press gang at work



There was much to fight for – if a man was taken, his family could be left in poverty. Some affrays involved hundreds of men and women, and many confrontations ended in death or serious injury on both sides. Rogers’s study of Liverpool and Bristol enables impressment to be set within the wider social and political context, explaining why some ports became off-limits for the press gangs, how circumstances changed in different ports, and why magistrates would refuse to co-operate.

Because press gangs targeted homecoming merchant ships (outward-bound merchantmen were

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exempt), crews were often set down before they reached port to keep them safe. Merchant ships heading for Bristol tended to release their men on the north Somerset coast, so that they could take refuge in the nearby coalfields.

Ports like Whitby were no-go areas for press gangs, and the book concludes with an analysis of *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863), the historical novel set in the 1790s by Elizabeth Gaskell, who made

use of the recollections of people she met in Whitby. In her tragic story, the press gang is a key element, and although she places the women on the sidelines, urging their men to violence, Rogers demonstrates that in reality women were in the thick of many disturbances. Rogers does not take in much beyond 1805, when impressment became such an issue with the United States of America and a key factor leading to the 1812 war, but he picks up the story again at the end of the war, showing how badly the seamen fared when laid off and how naval recruitment was gradually reformed.

The faults of this book must lie with the publisher – no overall bibliography, no maps, only two illustrations, a slim index and scattered errors. The author has an accessible writing style, and so *The Press Gang* should be both a popular non-fiction work and a classic textbook, but it feels too small and the stories too abbreviated, as if much information remains hidden in the archives (although copious references are given).

The sign of a good book is to leave the reader wanting more, which is certainly the case here, so perhaps the author has fulfilled his ambition. **■**

**Roy and Lesley Adkins** are the authors of *Jack Tar: Life in Nelson’s Navy* (Little, Brown 2008)