

the mid to latter part of the period. Williams nevertheless weaves together a breadth of materials, concepts, and sources with deceptive ease to create a cheerfully energetic, fast-paced narrative. Rather than critical texts, she privileges quotations from a wide variety of primary sources, with a lively presence of diaries, letters, and other firsthand accounts of reading, to bring its experience, described in the words of those who undertook it, constantly to the present-day reader's attention. Williams is, after all, very conscious of who readers are and how they read, then and now. The effect is to create a familiarity with these eighteenth-century readers, and with the activity of reading, to reinforce Williams's concluding suggestion that this world was "perhaps not so far from our own as we like to think" (278). The sum total is a volume that informs and engages across a broad spectrum of a supposed readership; it offers a comprehensive introduction to this period and terrain for those who are unfamiliar with them, and consolidation of existing knowledge for those who are not—plus more than a few revelations. It is, indeed, a book well worth reading.

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EVAN WILSON. *A Social History of British Naval Officers, 1775–1815*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017. Pp. 294. \$120.00 (cloth).
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This book is a quantitative study focusing on the careers of naval officers. It pursues, in-depth, the question of whether—as some contemporaries claimed—the navy was “overrun by the younger branches of nobility” (108), and to what extent individuals from a lower social background found their progress impeded. To examine these and related questions, Evan Wilson created two large databases. The first database, of commissioned officers, was a randomly selected sample of 556 men; the second, of warrant officers (chaplains, pursers, masters, and surgeons) consisted of 400 men. As Wilson notes, this represents a considerable advance over the more impressionistic studies that might rely on a smaller sample of prominent, successful, or notorious individuals.

A major finding of this study is that almost 60 percent of the commissioned officers never gained a rank higher than lieutenant. In contrast, chaplains and surgeons were in short supply and found it relatively easy to get work in the Royal Navy. The finding that so many officers' careers ended at the lower ranks has interesting implications, as Wilson points out, for the likelihood that the average naval officer would make a windfall from prize money. While examples of officers buying country estates with their windfall are well known, the benefits from the sale of captured vessels went disproportionately to those at the rank of captain and above. Meanwhile, “Lieutenants wore uniforms and swords, but their frequent bouts of unemployment and low half-pay hampered their chances of being accepted as gentlemen” (192–93).

Wilson shows that the middling sort and the professions, rather than the aristocracy, accounted for the parentage of most naval officers. While patronage was “the lubricant for most men's careers” (137), Wilson takes pains to distinguish between patronage based on carefully assessed merit and patronage based merely on the officer's fortuitous birth to well-connected parents. While the Royal Navy was not a meritocracy in the strictest sense, he concludes, overall the system tended to promote the deserving, particularly those who had proven themselves as leaders in battle. Wilson's account of the struggle to obtain recognition and win a path up this steep slope of promotion is interesting to read in conjunction with the newer scholarship on naval combat in this period; conduct that might appear selfish, bold, or

reckless looks different when set against the background of so many career trajectories that were generating little in the way of either prestige or income.

Beyond those with a special interest in naval topics, this book will be of great value to those who study professions and professionalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wilson provides a detailed and historically contextualized discussion of what formal or informal training might be involved for each role, including qualifying examinations. Historians of gentility and “the gentleman” should take note of this book as well, although gender or masculinity do not really make an appearance as categories of analysis, even in the discussion of uniforms or in the extended section on honor, dueling, and duty. In an overview chapter, “Naval Officers’ Social Status,” Wilson speaks directly to readers of Linda Colley and David Cannadine and offers many suggestive remarks on where these trends fit onto our bigger picture of British society in this period.

There are a number of missed opportunities to speak to a wider academic readership. An interesting subsection on the influence of the evangelical movement among naval officers is buried in the chapter “Patronage and Promotion Prospects,” and a discussion of naval officers who also served as members of Parliament gets the same treatment. A thoughtful digression on the challenges of command as it might relate to deeper social tensions (44–48) is subsumed in a chapter on careers. The successes, and failures, of the officers when they faced discontented or even mutinous crews were surely informed by their exact social background and their associated attitudes. However, Wilson’s focus quickly returns to professionalism in its narrow, technocratic sense: the officer was to “maintain discipline ... [and] exercise his ship into good working order; and to face the dangers of the sea and the enemy” (56).

In a work that presents itself as a “collective biography” (3) with a particular interest in social status and upward mobility, and despite the nuanced discussion of how naval status might or might not translate into gentility, there is no sustained analysis of how these men fit into their communities on shore. This subject receives only intermittent attention: “Both commissioned and warrant officers ... attended parties and balls, made friends with members of the landed gentry, and wooed the daughters of rich merchants” (183). On this point, Wilson is content with anecdotes rather than data. This stands in contrast to the studies of the social impact of the slave trade in Liverpool, for example, which quantify the marriage prospects of the slave ship captains in detail, as well as their property purchases and the location of their retirement. *A Social History of British Naval Officers*, then, is undeniably a useful contribution, although one that works from a somewhat constricted definition of social history’s appropriate scope and depth.

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NATHANIEL WOLLOCH. *Nature in the History of Economic Thought: How Natural Resources Became an Economic Concept*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. Pp. 272. \$149.95 (cloth).
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Nathaniel Wolloch’s *Nature in the History of Economic Thought* is a study concerned with intellectual continuity. It argues that underpinning the analyses of nature developed by mainstream economic theory, has been a single core theme: “the emphasis on the ineluctable need to maximize the use of natural resources and thus further human development” (x). This thesis is supported with an impressive range of evidence. In part one Wolloch traces the emergence of this conception of natural resources in antiquity and its use in medieval, Renaissance, and