Commodore Squib

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The Life, Times and Secretive Wars of England's First Rocket Man, Sir William Congreve, 1772-1828

By

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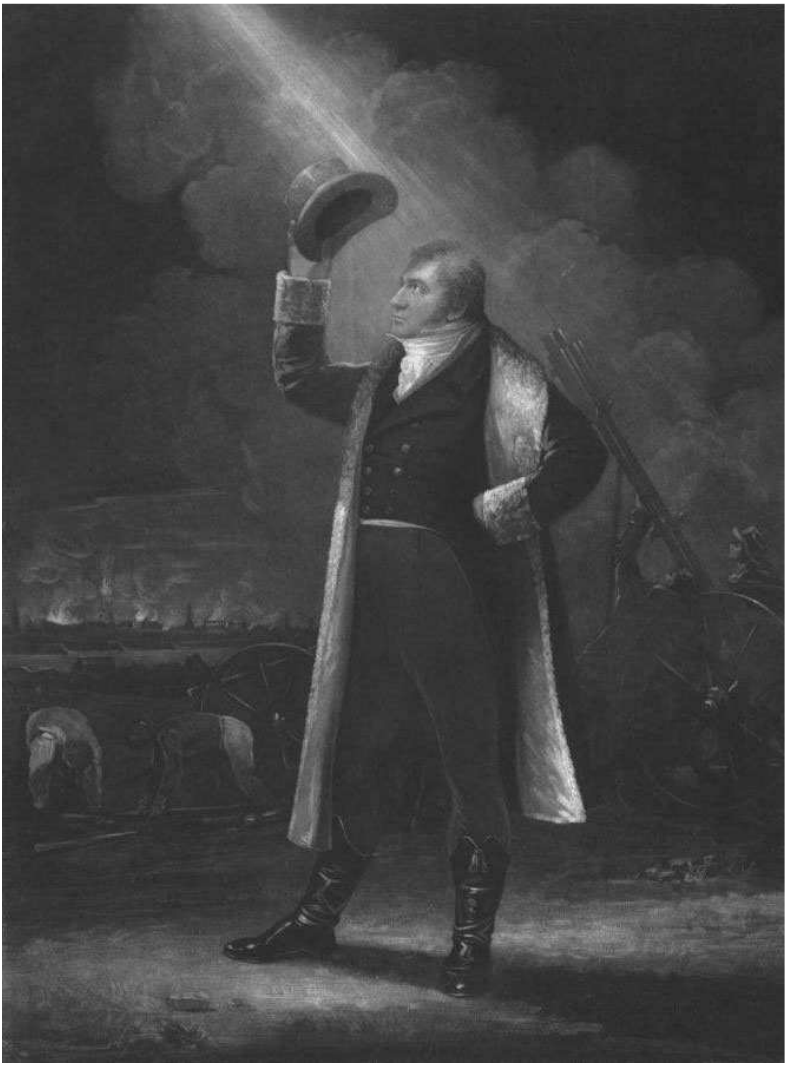

Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library, USA

PORTRAIT OF SIR WILLIAM CONGREVE
Observing the fire rockets invented by him during the bombardment of Copenhagen, 1807

“England is now at war with one half of the world, and has the other half to defend! Need one say more to prove that, with a limited population, the ordinary implements of war cannot suffice … it is one of the first interests of government to hold this forward as an era for the improvement of military mechanics, and by every liberal inducement in their power to promote the cultivation of this branch of the art, that we may thereby take the lead of the enemy in those mechanical aids which are calculated to increase the powers of our navies and armies, and having got it that we may maintain it”

—William Congreve the Younger, from his introduction to “*An Elementary Treatise on the Mounting of Naval Ordnance*” 1811

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began on the plains of North Germany where 132 Battery (The Bengal Rocket Troop) Royal Artillery practised to repel a Soviet attack that, happily for us, never materialised. Our twenty-six ton American-built guns were modern, but our battery emblem was an Indian tiger crouched over a very British Congreve rocket. Every evening during firing camps, two solid silver tigers - cast from the headpieces of horses that had once provided the battery with transport - adorned the makeshift officers' mess table in a leaky, wind-rattled marquee.

So the first acknowledgement must be to Major Mike Fallon RA who, never quite despairing of my well-concealed military potential, asked me to take an interest in the history of the battery from its creation on the very different plains of Northern India. If not altogether lost, I was usually late, so he will be unsurprised that this work has appeared after an interlude of about twenty years.

The librarian at the Royal Artillery Historical Trust, Paul Evans, was unfailingly helpful and directed me to piles of painstaking work already undertaken by Major JP Kaestlin. John Kaestlin had commanded the Bengal Rocket Troop during the 1950's and devoted years to researching the Congreve family. Sadly, he died before any of his work could be published, but the files of correspondence and notes are testimony to the thoroughness with which he approached a daunting task.

My thanks are also due to the staff of the Greenwich Heritage Centre who helped me to unearth the work of another unpublished writer, John Smith. His research was drawn to my attention by Maureen Greenland whose own doctoral thesis cast an invaluable light on William Congreve's involvement with the printing trade and with the battle against forgery that cost so many unfortunates their lives.

After I had left the regular Army for another life at the criminal Bar, it was extraordinary to discover that William Congreve also read for a legal career before venturing into journalism and the secretive world of military invention. I am grateful to Richard Durack of Stratford Library, and to the staffs of the British Library, the National Archive, Cambridge University Central Library, the Bodleian Library, and the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich for their help in tracing the eclectic career of this extraordinary man. Particular thanks are also due to John Devonport, and

to Peter Harrington, curator of the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection at Brown University Library, Providence, Rhode Island.

Finally, I must thank my wife for her painstaking correction of my numberless keyboard idiosyncrasies, and my parents for many valuable suggestions made while kindly reading the manuscript. This book is dedicated to them.

—Jim Earle
Duxford, Cambridge 2010

PROLOGUE

MAY 1803

At five o'clock on the morning of Monday 16 May 1803, four carriages clattered out of a waking city and began the seventy-one mile journey south from London to Dover. Two servants occupied the front carriage. At the window of the second could be seen the profile of His Excellency General Antoine-Francois Andreossy, lately ambassador of Napoleon Bonaparte to the Court of St James's. The remaining two carriages were laden with documents and a few inconsequential personal effects. Nearby in the almost deserted street stood a correspondent for the London *Morning Chronicle*, making notes for a terse report that would appear in the paper's Tuesday edition.[1]

Antoine-Francois Andreossy was no ordinary diplomat. The sweeping passage of his little cavalcade, the clatter of iron-rimmed wheels and creak of carriage leather, even the faint mist of animal breath on the still morning air, were all portents of war. General Andreossy was leaving England because the Treaty of Amiens, the treaty whose terms had been so optimistically printed in full by the *Times* on 31 March 1802, had failed. The peace that it created between England and France lasted less than fourteen months, and at the end there was nothing more for Andreossy to do than follow the diplomatic convention of applying for his passport. Once again, and this time for another twelve years, the countries of His Britannic Majesty King George III and the upstart genius Napoleon Bonaparte were locked in enmity.

General Andreossy found the practical business of implementing this calamity fraught with minor frustration. A fast rider with a succession of fresh horses could make the journey to Dover in about five hours, but it took the general and his suite most of a day. By the time that they reached Dover, tired, jolted, and travel-stained, it was too late to embark on a sea voyage to France that might take another twelve hours in contrary winds. In any case, news of the impending war had preceded them and some over-zealous officials had imposed an embargo to prevent any vessel leaving harbour. General Andreossy faced a dilemma that threatened his dignity. He could either try to evade the embargo, and leave the country

illegally, or he could send a messenger back to London requesting the urgent personal intervention of Lord Hawkesbury, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. It was decided that there could be no question of Napoleon's ambassador departing like a fugitive, so a messenger was hastily dispatched. Meanwhile General Andreossy, a phlegmatic man, settled himself in Dover to reflect upon the coming war and his time in England.

It had been a mission founded on genuine hope for more than a mere truce. When General Andreossy's predecessor came to London in 1801 to ratify the preliminaries of peace, there had been an enthusiastic crowd in the streets of London. To the disgust of William Cobbett, who deplored "the first time that an English mob became the cattle of a Frenchman", some of King George's subjects vied with one another to un-harness the horses and put themselves between the traces. All this was not because the terms of the treaty were popular - in fact they required the surrender of most of England's recent overseas conquests, and were widely disliked - but because after eight unremitting years of war a break in hostilities was badly needed. In November 1802, when it was the turn of General Andreossy to be received by King George III, great care was taken to record their initial conversation with utmost accuracy. General Andreossy's detailed report, preserved among six more of his most confidential letters at the *Archives Nationales* in Paris, was addressed directly to Napoleon Bonaparte.[2]

"I have always wished for peace", said the sixty-five year old king, "and do so still, and I shall remain of the same mind, as long as no attack is made on the dignity of my crown and the interests of my people." The king was in sound health, noted Andreossy, apparently unaffected by the mental illness that haunted his past and loomed over his future. But he could change subject abruptly, and he altered course during this conversation as if prompted by some bothersome inner voice. "Have you always been an officer?" "Sire", replied Andreossy, "for the last twenty years I have served in the Artillery."

This was true; although both knew it was not the whole truth.

"You are an Engineer, are you not?" persisted the king. And like all French emissaries a licensed spy, he might have added. Andreossy was tasked by Napoleon Bonaparte, amongst other matters inconsistent with peace, to send an agent to Edinburgh. There were eminent and influential French émigrés living there whose activities were of great interest to the authorities in Paris.

"In France, the duties of the Engineer and Artillery officers are distinct," ventured the general.

"You are an Engineer," insisted the king, "we know that you are qualified for either service and are a man of letters."

Andreossy was suitably modest, although his memoirs on the irrigation systems of Egypt and on the Canal du Midi were authoritative and quite well known.

"Sire, I have never laid claim to the title, but it has always been a pleasure to me to devote my leisure to study." "A literary life must entail many pleasures," mused the king, "and besides makes a man independent." Not that Andreossy had need of any literary earnings. His annual salary was 240,000 francs, to which had been added a lavish allowance of 120,000 francs to cover inaugural expenses and entertainment.[3]

For the remainder of his mission, Andreossy was struck repeatedly not just by the English desire for peace, but also by the way that it was tainted with a deep-rooted mistrust of France. On more than one occasion the contrast led him into personal difficulty, not least when he was in the volatile company of Richard Brinsley Sheridan. As the leading dramatist of his day and an eloquent politician, Sheridan was better equipped than most to express the national sense of brooding menace. He reserved special scorn for those who professed Napoleon a lesser tyrant than their own king, and throughout the peace he demanded a high level of readiness for war. During parliamentary debate about the size of the Army, he insisted in characteristically ringing terms that the destruction of England was, and had always been, Napoleon's obsession:

> "This is the first vision that breaks upon him through the gleam of the morning; this is his last prayer at night, to whatever Deity he addresses it, whether to Jupiter or to Mahomet, to the goddess of battles or the Goddess of Reason…… But Sir, the only consolation is that he is a great Philosopher and Philanthropist."[4]

Bonaparte was angered. A little later General Andreossy found himself at a six hour dinner with Richard Sheridan where both were guests of the Prince of Wales. It was a delicate affair, especially since the outspoken dramatist commanded no French and Andreossy had uncertain English. The Prince, who spoke excellent French, felt obliged to serve as both interpreter and apologist for Sheridan's hostility. Once again, the conversation was reported by Andreossy directly to Paris.

"You must know," enthused the Prince, that "Sheridan is not a man; he is the most extraordinary creature alive; with all his vices he is endowed with the rarest talents". He "was forced to speak strongly against the First Consul in order that he might be able in the end to keep peace." This was a

paradox that might only have occurred to Sheridan after it had dawned on the Prince of Wales. But the Prince was resolute in his diplomatic efforts. "It was only possible to attain peace," he explained, "by supporting the proposals made … in favour of an efficient army and navy."

The Prince expanded on his theme in terms carefully calculated to flatter. They would have been well-received when Andreossy's dispatches came to be read shortly afterwards in Paris. "If Bonaparte was only an ordinary man, he would not excite our fears and jealousy, but in treating with a man who has such talents and so great an ascendancy of genius, we must not rest secure with an ordinary armament."

It was not just that Bonaparte was a remarkable man that so troubled the Prince and his entourage, but that the First Consul of France was a powerful catalyst in times that were already exceptional. Every occupant of the increasingly warm room knew that the conduct of war itself had changed, and that it was changing still. The days of dynastic conflict - elegant duelling between absolute monarchs constrained by the huge expense of formal standing armies - had gone for ever. There would be no more elaborate bloodless manoeuvres, punctuated by rare slaughters, honourable surrenders, and gracious offers by one set of commanders for the other to fire first. As Marshal Foch wrote in the fading years of the century, "the wars of Kings were at an end; the wars of peoples were beginning".[5] In 1803 the technology of industrialised slaughter had yet to develop, but the fatal ideology that merged soldier with civilian had already taken root.

The tide of democracy, propelled in revolutionary France by Rousseau's claim that "Man is born free, yet everywhere is in chains", had cut at the foundations of social order. Virtue and the future lay in governance by a popular majority. If that popular majority had never yet acceded to power, but languished instead beneath the dictatorial yoke of the French Consulate, then war at least had been made inclusive through the introduction of conscription. It was conscription, the misappropriation of the general will to mobilise whole populations in the name of the Nation, that was essential to Napoleon's military success. It was the consequences of conscription that roused Sheridan to his parliamentary outburst, tactfully defused that night by the Prince of Wales while the port flowed and temperatures rose in the candlelight. Two years later, in 1805 after his shattering victory over Austria at Austerlitz, Napoleon made the point succinctly. He boasted in conversation with Metternich at the Palace of the Hapsburgs in Schoenbrunn that he could expend 30,000 conscripted lives a month.[6] Men were now cheap as dirt.

General Andreossy may have felt some sympathy with anxious representatives of the old order. His own descent was from an aristocratic Italian family with roots deep in the *ancien regime* of Europe. Like Napoleon, he had little faith in Rousseau's optimistic contention that man in a state of nature was a noble savage, entitled to be trusted with political power. Andreossy had served with the First Consul in Egypt, and after that campaign Napoleon expressed clear views on Rousseau and about his philosophy. "I have been especially disgusted with Rousseau since I have seen the East", he remarked, "Savage man is a dog".[7] But, in addition to being a diplomat, General Andreossy was a professional soldier and pragmatist, familiar as any in his generation with the work of another influential man of letters, the Comte de Guibert.

Barely twelve years after Rouseau published his *Social Contract* in 1762, de Guibert roundly condemned the limited wars of dynastic kings, arguing that they gave only an illusion of economy and humanity. This was because posturing and manoeuvres might preserve expensive armies for another day, but they led to no clear political solution. Disputes could smoulder unceasingly for years, and de Guibert looked forward to a much more decisive future:

> "Let us suppose, that a vigorous people were to arise in Europe: a people of genius, of resources and of political understanding: a people that united with these sterling virtues and with a national militia a fixed plan of aggrandisement, and never lost sight of it: a people that knows how to make war cheaply and sustain itself on its victories. Such a people would not be compelled to limit its fighting by financial calculations. One would see this people subjugate its neighbours, and overthrow our feeble constitutions, like the north wind bends the frail reeds". [8]

With the collapse of the Peace of Amiens, and perhaps to Andreossy's personal regret, the north wind was stirring once again around the battered shores of England. Later, when he was serving as Napoleon's Chief-of-Staff, he must have pondered the same conundrum as Sheridan. How was an island nation, with limited resources of manpower, to survive against a revolution in ideas, and a military genius who commanded the conquered resources of Europe? In Napoleon's words, "fifteen millions of people must give way to forty millions". It was sometimes hard to fault his logic.

George III had remarked that General Andreossy was far from a typical or simple soldier. He was an accomplished expert in hydrography and artillery who used his time in England to make the acquaintance of Sir Joseph Banks, the president of the Royal Society. In fact, one of his last social engagements was a farewell visit on Friday 6 May to the home of

Sir Joseph, duly reported in the *Morning Chronicle* on the following Monday. Unlike war, science had not become a pursuit for the masses. But in England there was a class of gifted amateur that occupied the uncertain ground between formal scientific experimentation and potting-shed tinkering. The erudite Sir Joseph Banks was not of that order, but he knew about men who were. During his time in England, General Andreossy had made it his business to know about them as well.

Merely from studying the press, General Andreossy would have been aware of plans to extend an institution known as the Royal Laboratory from its workaday home at Woolwich, in south-east London, across the grey uncompromising swirl of the River Thames. As an artilleryman, he would have recognised the Royal Laboratory as home to the practice of gunnery, the hybrid art and science of using explosives to hurl lethal projectiles. He also knew that the Royal Laboratory, under its Comptroller Colonel William Congreve, was engaged in the study and development of innovative warlike techniques. The fifth of Andreossy's seven letters to Bonaparte, dated 17 March 1803, tells how he asked Lord Hawkesbury to account for the work at Woolwich. Perhaps he surmised already that the Royal Laboratory might hold a key to redressing the balance of manpower between England and her continental enemy. Perhaps, like Colonel Congreve, he glimpsed the potential for destruction that lay in a still dimly perceived future of technological advance and mechanical experimentation.

What General Andreossy could not divine from his newspapers, or from his diplomatic enquiries, was the precise nature of this military experimentation at Woolwich. It was not because of voluntary restraint by editors, or from a patriotic concern for national security, but because of a general lack of awareness. The potential of science, and even of mechanics, was poorly understood by the majority of the population at the dawn of the nineteenth century. Neither was widely regarded as a war-winning factor in its own right, and although the general climate of fear and uncertainty encouraged some wild speculation, there was no master salesman or populariser to capture the imagination. That role, bringing with it considerable controversy and more than a little notoriety, was to fall upon one of the most ingenious and erratic human products of the Royal Laboratory. He was the eldest son of Colonel William Congreve, a man who shared the father's name and passion for invention but never, in the British Army at least, his military rank.

William Congreve, who must clumsily be described as "the Younger" to distinguish him from his father, was not just a practical inventor but also an unusually ruthless and effective entrepreneur. His secretive

contribution to the wars that followed General Andreossy's precipitate departure from England in 1803 is the subject of this book.

Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
O say, does the star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?
—Francis Scott Key *The Star Spangled Banner* (1814)

CHAPTER ONE

UNANIMITY!

Breakfast for Sir Alexander Cochrane on the morning of 14 September 1814 was a perfunctory affair tainted by the odour of burnt gunpowder and the acrid taste of unaccustomed failure. For twenty-five hours, ships under his command had been bombarding a hard-pressed American garrison in Fort McHenry, lighting the night and deafening gunners with the percussion of their own firing. With its shot-scarred pentagonal trace of bastions and ditches, traverses and batteries, caponiers and ravelins, Fort McHenry under its tattered battle flag was all that stood between Sir Alexander and his mission to burn the vital port of Baltimore.

Watching the attack from another vessel, under close British supervision in the choppy grey-green waters of Chesapeake Bay, an American lawyer called Francis Scott Key was moved to poetry by the obstinacy of his countrymen. If he had been in a position to recite some of the lines evolving in his mind, perhaps to taunt Sir Alexander while the British withdrew, he might have chosen:

> "O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave,
> O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

It was not until 3 March 1931 that Key's poem was adopted by congressional resolution as the American national anthem; but the decision once made unintentionally immortalised one of the smallest British vessels taking part in the action against Fort McHenry. She was the two-masted brig, *HMS Erebus*, a ship named for the son of Chaos, the embodiment in Greek mythology of primordial darkness. When Key wrote in his second stanza about "The rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air," he was describing a primitive, gunpowder-propelled, stick-stabilised missile that issued at noisy but regular intervals from *HMS Erebus* throughout the long night's bombardment.

This was not the first time that rockets had been used against Americans on their own continent. In August 1813, British troops advancing south from Canada fired them in great numbers to demoralise an

inexperienced militia at the battle of Bladensburg. The militiamen fled in chaotic confusion, enabling their enemies to enter Washington a few days later and burn both the Capitol and the residence of the President. When the residence was restored and its smoke-blackened structure re-painted, it acquired a new and lasting name as the White House. But the appearance of rockets soaring over Fort McHenry was still a novelty worthy of a poet's attention. Unknown to Francis Scott Key at the time, they were the brainchild of a fellow lawyer living three thousand miles away near the Thames estuary in England. He was the mercurial, inventive and ingenious first son of a baronet, christened - like his father - William Congreve.

The complex series of events that led Congreve from a lawyer's chambers to rockets, and the rockets from England to Chesapeake Bay, began with the advent of a different war and the tortured death of a British government. Or perhaps, more prosaically, it began on Ludgate Hill in London at the premises of John Parsons, a little known bookseller whose otherwise quiet and unassuming life in the summer of 1804 was about to be disrupted by an angry Rear-Admiral and a ruinously expensive libel trial.

The first link in the fateful chain was a pamphlet, masquerading as a news sheet under a clumsily drawn picture of Britannia blowing a trumpet. It was called the *Royal Standard and Loyal Political Register*. William Congreve, a tall, fair-haired and slightly portly thirty-two years of age, was both editor and part-owner. Unlike his seventeenth-century playwright ancestor, the Congreve that John Parsons knew could never have been described as a great literary stylist. But he was a mildly pompous man of energy, charm, and forceful opinions. It was these opinions that John Parsons, probably in a careless moment that he came to regret, undertook to publish. The *Royal Standard* was available weekly across London for the price of nine pence.[9]

The battle-cry of the *Royal Standard and Loyal Political Register* was "Unanimity". In fact, this word was emblazoned in capital letters with an emphatic exclamation mark under Britannia's skirts. There were, however, strict limits to the types of person that the *Royal Standard* was prepared to be unanimous with, and there was one man in particular who stood well beyond the pale. He was the radical social commentator, future inmate of Newgate jail and self-appointed champion of the poor, William Cobbett. A former soldier born near Farnham in Surrey, Cobbett had married the daughter of an artillery sergeant from Woolwich and founded his own *Weekly Political Register* in 1802. The *Register* tirelessly attacked what its proprietor habitually described as "the Thing", an undeclared conspiracy of the rich, privileged and corrupt to exhaust the poor.

Congreve's *Royal Standard* was created in response the same year, not because its editor approved of corruption, or wanted to exhaust the poor, but because he considered Cobbett to be a purveyor of socially divisive ideas. In the highly-charged political atmosphere of the time, Congreve was resolutely for the established government under the failing, usually mediocre, but essentially pacifistic leadership of Prime Minister Henry Addington. William Cobbett, who was being sued for seditious libel after criticising the government's handling of rebellion in Ireland, was emphatically not.[10] Cobbett, a self-taught and much more influential journalist, regarded William Congreve with contempt, believing with some justification that the *Royal Standard* and another print called the *Pilot* were little more than government sponsored propaganda. Surviving copies of the *Royal Standard* leave no doubt that Congreve regularly read Cobbett's views and that their mistrustful loathing was mutual.[11]

By the early part of 1803, when it was obvious that the Peace of Amiens could be no more than a temporary truce with Napoleonic France, Congreve's stubborn support for the Addington government meant that the *Royal Standard* struggled against an ever-quickening tide of events. Addington's ambitions for peace abroad and retrenchment at home, aspirations that William Congreve fervently shared, were destroyed by the resumption of war. While Bonaparte rapidly assembled an invasion army on the cliffs around Boulogne, Britain's most unlikely political allies joined in opposition to their own Prime Minister. Congreve's appeal to unanimity was in reality an attack on the embattled factions and personalities whose only point of agreement was Addington's inadequacy as a war leader.

Although there were long-established political groupings, the conventional labels of Whig and Tory were a poor indication of allegiance in this developing maelstrom. Addington himself was a protégé of William Pitt the Younger, whose resignation in 1801 after seventeen years as Prime Minister presaged the brief period of peace. With the new war, Pitt was determined on a return to office, even though the issue over which he had nominally resigned - the political emancipation of Catholics - remained unresolved. But pride demanded that Pitt could not return unless he was asked back by George III, whose intransigence over the Catholic question had threatened Pitt's scheme to bring about unification with Ireland. Pitt's own conceptions of honour also required him to show at least some semblance of continuing loyalty to his old friend Henry Addington.

Pitt's friends and former cabinet colleagues, notably Henry Dundas who as Lord Melville became a First Lord of the Admiralty, George Canning a future Prime Minister, and the influential Norfolk landowner

William Windham, had no doubt that Pitt was the right man to lead the country through its new crisis. They were impatient however with his scrupulous indecision, Canning going so far as to complain about Pitt's "blind obedience and self-abasement".[12] Even the Prime Minister, plucked reluctantly from his former role as Speaker of the House of Commons, did not really regard himself as a war leader. In March 1803 he volunteered to stand down in favour of Pitt's older brother, the Earl of Chatham. It was thought that, if neither Henry Addington nor William Pitt led the government, both could provide honourable service as senior members of a Chatham administration. The scheme resounded with eighteenth century compromise, but it soon died. Faced by a resurgent Bonaparte, Pitt could settle for nothing less than unfettered power.

Despite the restless presence of William Pitt, and in spite of the Prime Minister's own uncertainty, Addington's admirers were sufficiently strong to ensure that he could not leave office without a fight. In contrast with Pitt's personal austerity, Addington was a frank and cheerful character whose early weeks in office before the Peace of Amiens happened, more by luck than judgment, to coincide with two major British victories. During March 1801 the French were defeated at Alexandria, preparing the way for their eventual evacuation of Egypt. In April of the same year Nelson had destroyed or captured most of the Danish fleet at Copenhagen.

Both successes strengthened Britain's hand in the ensuing peace negotiations, and George III conceived a personal liking for Addington, making a gift to him of the White Lodge in Richmond Park. The king's favourable view of Addington was probably assisted by the resurrection to political life of Charles James Fox, a radical Whig who professed an over-mighty monarch to be a greater threat to the British constitution than the French Revolution. Sensing a prospect of change, Fox was leading a disparate opposition, which in turn was joining Pitt and his supporters in mounting attacks on Addington.

Not all Whigs, however, were necessarily opposed to Henry Addington. In May 1803 George Tierney, with whom Pitt had once fought a duel over a bill to increase the supply of naval manpower, became Addington's Treasurer of the Navy. It was a crucial appointment because the issue of whether the government had neglected national defence or not was now central to its survival. As the politicians manoeuvred, the newspapers took sides, adopting increasingly trenchant tones as they did so. The *Morning Chronicle* declared itself for Pitt, and for the opposition factions that were demanding Addington's resignation. The London *Times* generally favoured the government, having temporarily ceased to support Pitt when he stopped financing the paper during his first administration.

Among the many lesser publications, Congreve's *Royal Standard* aped Cobbett's style of acerbic editorial, often presenting its own views as if they were correspondence from an outraged public.

A typical edition of the *Royal Standard* carried wordy letters purporting to emanate from writers with grandiose aliases such as "Benbow", "Fabricius", "Horatio" or "Xenophon". On occasion, Congreve wrote under his own name, sometimes becoming so agitated that he would not wait for the next weekly issue of the *Royal Standard* but wrote to the *Times* instead. Given the remarkably similar written styles of Benbow, Fabricius and William Congreve, it must have been a busy time for the young editor as he moved between his desk, the bookshop of his publisher and the premises of his printer, James Whiting, in Finsbury Place. It became busier still when the *Royal Standard* began to take an active interest in the readiness of the navy and in the preparations that were being made to resist Bonaparte's invasion. These were issues that were being used to belabour the government in parliament, and the *Royal Standard* was determined to make a robust response to what it termed the "Pitto-Foxo-Windhamites". An unexpected opportunity came on 2 November 1803 when a ship of the line called *HMS Ajax* returned prematurely from blockade duty off Boulogne and dropped anchor in the Downs.

Coincidentally, *Ajax* in 1803 was under the command of Captain Alexander Cochrane, the same officer who a decade and several promotions later would bring Congreve rockets to bear on Fort McHenry. He had been in command since February 1799, assisting with distinction in the capture of Alexandria and returning to home waters only after the advent of peace. But *Ajax* was never an easy command because the vessel had been badly built and was in constant need of repair. Properly constructed wooden warships were usually remarkably durable. *HMS Victory*, for example, was already forty-four years old in 1804 and it was another nine years before she was withdrawn from active service. *Ajax*, by comparison, cost the British exchequer more than £17,000 in essential repairs alone during her first four years of life[13]. This was a substantial sum when the cost of a typical third-rate ship of the line newly built was about £40,000.[14]

The other distinctive feature about *HMS Ajax* was that she had been built in a private civilian shipyard owned by Messrs Brent and Randal of Rotherhithe, a yard more accustomed to constructing merchantmen for the East India Company than men-of-war like *Ajax*. The sorry condition of *Ajax* was justification for the government's controversial policy that reliance on civilian shipyards should be reduced, even while Napoleon's invasion fleet grew at an alarming rate just across the Channel. That policy

was the direct responsibility of Earl St Vincent, appointed as First Lord of the Admiralty by the Addington administration in 1801, and engaged ever since in unremitting war against corruption in the naval establishment.

It was St Vincent's fixed article of faith that "depredations upon the King's naval stores did not annually amount to less than £500,000" and that this figure, huge though it was, related only to theft[15]. The loss from "waste, malversation and pure carelessness" was many times greater, and its reduction was as essential to national defence as ships themselves.

The First Lord was certainly correct about the waste of national resources. A seventy-four gun ship similar to *Ajax* was said by the ship builders to need at least three thousand loads of timber for the hull alone. A single load consisted of fifty cubic feet, so merely to fit this quantity of wood into a single vessel would have required a hull that was virtually solid. The real timber content was about five hundred loads, and the same amount again would have been legitimately lost in off-cuts and sawdust. The remaining two thousand loads were classified as "chips" and kept by shipwrights as lawful perquisites of their trade. As St Vincent and every other naval commander knew, many of these "chips" were so large that entire timber-framed houses were being built out of them in dockyard areas such as Deptford.[16]

So St Vincent regarded any shipyard that was not run by the Admiralty as a sink of corruption, populated by civilians who were for the most part opportunistic criminals. Above all things, he mistrusted men of influence whose personal interests were served by lucrative naval contracts to private yards. In 1802, St Vincent established a Commission of Naval Inquiry whose reports were assiduous in identifying and castigating all forms of corruption or "jobbery". Meanwhile the shipwrights, offered mere gold for their services, went on strike and placed an embargo on their stocks of English timber. The navy was slow to find alternative foreign sources of supply, or to use species other than oak, so the shortage was overcome with poorly seasoned timber that rapidly developed wet or dry rot. Yet more timber was then needed for expensive repairs. Meanwhile, the essential task of building up the navy appeared in the eyes of St Vincent's many detractors, to have been over-looked.[17]

Opponents of the Addington government claimed that St Vincent's failure to place contracts with civilian shipyards had left the navy in a state of weakness. For once in naval affairs, comparisons with France seemed increasingly odious. Bonaparte's Inspector General of the National Flotilla, Pierre Forfait, was assembling a light troop-carrying fleet at unprecedented rates using every shipyard available to him. From the Mediterranean to Paris and the Rhine, vessels were being built for the

French navy. Invasion craft to transport the "Army of England" were leaving the navigable rivers between Harfleur and Flushing almost on a daily basis, and the Royal Navy was able to do little more than observe as they scuttled under cover of coastal batteries to heavily protected assembly points. The watchers, according to Addington's opponents, lacked shallow draught vessels that could pursue and engage the French close to shore.

Pitt himself cast doubt on the competence of St Vincent, saying that "between his Lordship as a Commander on the Sea and His Lordship as First Lord of the Admiralty, there is a very wide difference".[18] Few jibes could have been better calculated to infuriate Earl St Vincent or those who, like the editor and readers of the *Royal Standard*, believed that "the present ministers have done all that they could do for the interests of the Country". The Admiralty Board was goaded by the First Lord, and by the pro-government prints, to sue Messrs Brent and Randall for the public money wasted on *HMS Ajax.* Since there was no real question that the ship had been badly built, the action should have been a relatively simple matter of quantifying damages. That task, in accordance with the procedure of the day, would have fallen to a jury directed, in this instance, by Lord Chief Justice Ellenborough.

Perhaps fortunately for the country, Lord Chief Justice Ellenborough was no indignant sea-dog. He was politically highly astute, and he knew that if William Pitt returned to power for a second time in the very near future then attitudes towards the *Ajax* case would almost certainly change entirely. Consequently he played for time, assisted in his prevarication by the Admiralty's own barrister in the case, Thomas Erskine. At length, Ellenborough opined that a jury could not possibly "determine a case of this kind relating to the construction and proportion of such an intricate machine". He felt that it would be much better if the shortcomings of *HMS Ajax* could be considered at more leisure by "some person who will have time and opportunity to enquire into the facts"[19]. On 23 February 1804, the matter was adjourned pending a detailed report whose outcome was not to be made public.

William Congreve was incensed. This was a cover-up, a whitewash whose repercussions, if he had any say in the matter, would soon be immense. The *Royal Standard* roared into print, "much lamenting that … a matter of the highest importance … should be consigned to a private reference." It went on to criticise the Chief Justice, in shamelessly personal terms, for concealing the corruption in naval procurement that Earl St Vincent and his political masters were trying to root out. The story was duly taken up by the *Times*, which shared Congreve's partiality for the government and praised "the very luminous statement in the *Royal*

Standard"[20]. "This circumstance," thundered the *Times*, "will convince the country at large, in spite of the obloquy which is daily propagated against him, that the Chief of the Admiralty regards neither difficulty nor odium when he is reforming abuses so perilous to the British navy … and pursuing measures so essential to the strength of the British empire." Within days of taking up the *Ajax* story, William Congreve was where he spent a very large proportion of his future life: at the centre of a heated debate with threats of legal proceedings flying like the new-fangled fragmenting shells of Henry Shrapnel.

The *Morning Chronicle*, an opponent of the government, joined the fray by printing a letter whose author identified himself only as "Vindex". The true identity of Vindex remains uncertain, but his views on William Congreve were forthright. The editor of the *Royal Standard* was roundly condemned as a "mere party scribbler", one who had audaciously attacked the Chief Justice and who unscrupulously sought the public humiliation of an honourable shipbuilder.

Unable to contain himself until the next edition of the *Royal Standard*, Congreve sent a lengthy riposte to the *Times*, which printed it on 3 April 1804. The real culprit, claimed Congreve, was not the Chief Justice after all but Thomas Erskine, the barrister tasked with representing the public interest who had, nevertheless, allowed the case to become veiled in secrecy. In the face of such weakness, the nation was fortunate indeed to have Earl St Vincent, since "nothing but the virtuous resolution of such men as the noble Earl can save us from destruction. It is time ALL should feel this important truth. And silence, in such a moment, would even be criminal! … I have and will call loudly on my fellow citizens to range themselves on the side of those Ministers on whom their safety depends; nor shall the clamours of such men as Vindex silence me. If this be audacity, I am audacious!"[21]

If it was not audacious, it was certainly incautious to be quite so outspoken about Thomas Erskine, who was already well-established in a career that would lead to the Lord Chancellorship of England. He was recognised as the leading contemporary expert on libel and was one of the two Members of Parliament sitting for the Borough of Portsmouth. An attack on Erskine was especially unwise since William Congreve was soon to find himself the defendant in a high-profile case where Erskine represented the plaintiff. Erskine was perhaps the first celebrity lawyer, a man whose past was already so veiled in rumour that fact would be difficult to distinguish from myth. He was not a person likely to forget or forgive a slight. Worse, his client was a colourful and influential figure in

his own right, being not only a Rear-Admiral of the Blue but the Whig Member of Parliament for Gloucester.

Rear-Admiral George Cranfield Berkeley was unusual among serving naval officers in that he opposed St Vincent's attacks on corruption in the naval establishment and was prepared to say so. He was not so foolish as to endorse corrupt practices openly, but he believed that flexibility oiled the machinery of naval procurement, and that St Vincent's focus on large ships built in Admiralty dockyards was wrong. Moreover, he was not without sea-going experience of his own, and there could be no doubt about the personal courage that he displayed during many years of varied service. Since this formidable and outspoken officer had a formative effect on the life of William Congreve, his career warrants more than passing examination here.

Striding across Westminster, or riding through his constituency, George Berkeley could reflect on a naval career that shaped him man and boy for nearly forty years. It was a career nurtured by brilliant family connections. Rear Admiral Augustus Keppel, the first Viscount Keppel, was a cousin. But even his many detractors had to allow that George Berkeley possessed a degree of talent. At the age of fourteen he was helping to survey the Newfoundland coast and the Gulf of St Lawrence with Joseph Gilbert, a man of famous ability who was to be Master of *Resolution* during Cook's exploration of Antarctica.

At sixteen, Berkeley served under Earl St Vincent himself at a time when the future First Sea Lord was the rather less than humble Captain Jervis, prowling the Mediterranean in *HMS Alarm*, one of the navy's first copper-bottomed frigates. If it had not been for politics, Berkeley's subsequent career might have flourished. But in 1774 he represented the Whig interest in his native Gloucestershire and lost heavily in a campaign that cost over £100,000 in entertainment and bribes. He was to win his seat nine years later, but the political diversion at a formative stage nearly finished him as a professional sailor. Four years passed before the patronage of Admiral Keppel gained him a lieutenancy aboard *Victory*, but even then Berkeley's first command - a fireship in the storm-tossed Channel Fleet - was less glamorous than a man of such family might expect.

During the summer of 1779 the combined French and Spanish fleets assembled in the Channel and Berkeley's energetic service won him a recommendation for promotion. Someone in the Admiralty disliked his Whig affiliations, however, and sent him back to Newfoundland instead. There he chased American privateers with undiminished zeal, capturing nine of them before returning to home waters.

If George Berkeley, in his fiftieth year, walked with a slight limp, then it could probably be traced to a troublesome ulcerated leg injury incurred during his command of *HMS Marlborough* on the 1 June 1794. This had been a day of victory over the French so complete that every English captain present had been awarded a gold medal and the thanks of Parliament. The *Times* was still printing celebratory odes about the "Glorious First", (so called because it happened far out in the Atlantic, away from landmarks that might lend their name to the battle), months after news of it reached London. Although command of the victorious fleet had been Lord Howe's, the battle had been one of Berkeley's finest hours.

Yet this distinguished sailor, like his barrister Thomas Erskine, was another powerful man of whom the impetuous William Congreve was about to make an inveterate enemy through his foray into journalism. If the scandal over *HMS Ajax* was the first step towards the young lawyer-turned-editor's downfall, then the parliamentary debate that took place on 27 February 1804 was the second. The subject of the debate was supposed to be legislation to assist the raising of volunteer reserve soldiers. In fact, it became an argument about tactics in the event of an invasion. It was the beginning of the end, both for Henry Addington's government and for William Congreve's *Royal Standard.*