

**Morddel, Anne. *Napoleon's American Prisoners*  
Boydell Press, 2024**

xxvi + 228 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, glossary  
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Anne Morddel's book on *Napoleon's American Prisoners* has been a long time coming and fills a huge gap in our knowledge of how some 1,500 American seamen were treated in and by France during the Napoleonic Wars. Having written extensively on French genealogy and researched in French, American, and British archives, Morddel has turned her attention to the American victims of Napoleon and how they were treated and mistreated by France and their own consuls from about 1794 to the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire in 1814.

Unlike Britain which had developed a ministry to deal with prisoners of war and did not bother with neutral prisoners swept up in shipwrecks, captures, and similar events and sent to the UK, France had a number of ministries to deal with foreign prisoners and defined neutrality much more narrowly than Britain or America. Although theoretically neutral in the wars between France and England, American seamen looked and spoke like Britons and were easily confused with them, as far as the French were concerned. Sometimes, due to the strenuous efforts of the American consuls or the American Minister Plenipotentiary, a Seaman's Protection Certificate (given against impressment) and affidavits from family in America were enough to guarantee the release of an American seaman from captivity. The French were skeptical about Protection Certificates because they were often lost or counterfeited. For the most part, the French were so concerned with freeing a British seaman posing as an American that they erred on the side of caution and denied any and all requests for release.

Research deep into the original documents by Morddel brings to light some of the unknown stories of individual seamen and sailors swept up in the loss of their ships on French shores which led them to France without papers or the recapture of their British prizes by French privateers which made them automatically British (to the French) for sailing on a British ship. After being kept in a prison close to port, where they were held until the capture of their ship was confirmed as good prize, American sailors were marched miles (often 600 to 800 kilometres) into the interior of France and held in large converted fortresses such as Arras, Valenciennes, Givet, and Cambrai where it was hard for the consuls to visit them and even more difficult for the men to argue for their release. Captains of merchant vessels or privateers were usually allowed parole or were even exchanged for French seamen of similar status, but the

lowly American seaman, whether Black or White, was left in prison for as long as Napoleon reigned. It was Napoleon himself who had the final say about who stayed and who left.

Bearing in mind that France and America were never officially at war, Morddel addresses the various reasons why American seamen were regarded so poorly by France. Since they were not at war, they could not be exchanged and were of no use to France. One of the serious concerns was mistaking an American for a British seaman since they both spoke English. Other neutral nations such as Denmark, Norway, or the Netherlands were not a problem. It was difficult for an American to prove that he was not British (some had even been born in Britain and become naturalized Americans) which was why negotiated releases were so rare. Some Americans joined French privateers to show they were willing to sail against the British. As Morddel points out, this was also the only means of getting away since escaping from the various forts was virtually impossible, especially once American ships were forbidden to land in France. Some 250 Americans signed on for six-month cruises for prize money and the chance of freedom. Sometimes they succeeded, occasionally they died in combat, and sometimes they were recaptured by His Majesty's vessels and ended up in British prisons during the War of 1812.

Morddel has thoughtfully included appendices listing the American prisoners released in 1807 (44 names) and 1813 (116 men) and also those who escaped, as well as the names of 109 men who died in France. The wonder is how few deaths there actually were. One of the chief reasons why Mordell's book is so welcome is the lack of information on American prisoners of war held in France. Little has been written in either French or English about the topic with most memoirs actually written by British clergymen. The role of American consuls also played a part since their efforts were often thwarted, they fought among themselves, and they were too poorly paid to make much of a difference in the lives of captured seamen. As for the four Ministers Plenipotentiary, Morddel describes two of them as "proud and bad tempered," one as a "cheerful thief," and one as an observer rather than a participant in what was going on around him. The problems of American seamen seemed far away.

Although not directly stated, almost all of the American prisoners of war held in France under Napoleon were merchant seamen. These were the lowest paid, least important men afloat and were treated as such by their French captors. Few, if any, were allowed to escape or free themselves through legitimate channels. Instead, they were left to wait until peace resolved their status. Thanks to Morddel's book there is at last some light thrown on American prisoners of war held in France but more remains to be done. Morddel has

opened the door to this rich source of research, but more is required to bring Napoleon's American prisoners of war to life.

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**Morriss, Roger, ed. *Samuel Bentham, Inspector General of Naval Works, 1796–1807, Letters and Papers*. Navy Records Society, vol. 172  
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xli + 468 pp., illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index  
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This is the 172nd volume in the Navy Records Society's publication of papers, journals, and letters ranging across British naval history from the 1500s to the 1970s. Each volume has added insight and allowed for wider access to the archival material. This volume, edited by Roger Morriss, covers the key records of Samuel Bentham's experience as the Inspector General of the Naval Works, civil architect, and engineer. This is a continuation of Morriss's exploration of Bentham's life and influence on naval dockyard development in the book, *Science, Utility and Maritime Power: Samuel Bentham in Russia, 1779–91* (Routledge, 2016).

This collection is divided into eight sections, each focused on a particular topic or set of documents, and introduced and contextualized by Morriss. Bentham's Russian experience is discussed in the general introduction as it relates to his work for the British Admiralty. On his return from Russia (1791), Bentham developed new machinery which could be applied to dockyards. In 1794, the inventions brought interest from the Admiralty, leading to his redevelopment of Portsmouth Dockyard, which is covered in section one. His renovation created a larger basin, more docks and longer jetties to facilitate ships moving in and out of the docks. It would increase efficiency and capacity in ship repair. His proposal for this work led to his appointment to the position of Inspector General of Naval Works, which is the subject of the second section. An ambitious project to reform all the dockyards was developed, but immediately faced push-back from the Navy Board, whose members felt threatened by Bentham's ideas and independence from their control. Ultimately, he was restricted to implementing changes only to Sheerness Dockyard. Section three focuses on Bentham's desire to use contemporary chemistry, but his failure to work cooperatively with the chemist limited that area of exploration. The seven experimental vessels he constructed between 1795 and 1797 are the topic of section four, and his promotion of non-recoil