

Preface

A good story needs no excuse, and the events surrounding the British bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807 make for an engrossing story. They are full of drama, incident and tragedy and involve some remarkable personalities – some famous, others obscure. The British expedition to Zealand to gain possession of the Danish fleet must rank as one of the most successful combined military operations in history – swift, ruthless and effective. And it is the first occasion in modern history when the gruesome expedient of terror bombardment was deployed against a major European city.

Some of the intelligence underpinning the British decision to strike against Denmark was inaccurate and the operation is also a prime example of the principle of pre-emptive war in action. For a reader in the first decade of the twenty-first century, these two elements of the picture inevitably create some uncanny parallels with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. I suspect that readers will interpret the evidence about 1807 in their own ways and reach their own conclusions about the rightness of the British decision to attack Denmark – just as they have done over the invasion of Iraq.

The story is its own reward, but this book also throws light into a dark corner of the history of the Napoleonic period. Except in Denmark, the bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807 has largely been forgotten. Although there have been articles and chapters in larger studies dealing with aspects of the bombardment, this is the first book devoted to the subject. With the notable exceptions of John Holland Rose and Anthony Ryan, British historians have shied away from it. The victory was strategically brilliant but perhaps too easily won. And there is no getting away from the fact that the operation, whether justified or not, involved unprovoked aggression against a neutral state and the terror bombardment of a civilian population.

The choice of subject matter does not mean that this is a debunking book. The story is told essentially from the British point of view, and I have aimed to write with empathy for the fearful dilemmas faced by the British government in the summer of 1807. But outcomes were determined by the interaction between the decisions taken by all the major players in the drama. It is important to extend understanding to the other side of the hill and to see the governments of Denmark, France and Russia not just as threats to Britain but also as independent agents with their own fears and objectives.

The book is based on extensive original research in British and foreign archives and offers new evidence and new interpretations on many aspects of the story. But I have made space for anecdote and personality as well as the harsh march of events, and I have tried to present the story in a way which can appeal equally to the professional historian specialising in the Napoleonic period and to the general reader with an interest in the past. I take to heart George Trevelyan's remarks in the preface to the first volume of his *England under Queen Anne*, published in 1930.

For my part, I cannot abandon the older ideal of History that was once popular in England, that the same book should make its appeal both to the general reader and

to the historical student. In these latter days there tends to be division. It is right there should be division in some cases, but it is right in other cases that the older unity should be attempted.

That is an ideal to which I subscribe. The reader will decide whether I have lived up to it.

There are many historical narratives which can be constructed around the effects of underlying economic, social and cultural forces. The bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807 is not one of them. In this case, the role of chance and the individual are central. The ferocious will of Napoleon Bonaparte, the devious and nebulous ambitions of Alexander I of Russia and George Canning's determination to prove a worthy heir to William Pitt made a difference in 1807. They were all, of course, influenced by the political culture of international relations at the time, but other men would have reacted differently to the opportunities and dangers that confronted them in the summer of 1807.

The bombardment of Copenhagen is not a purely Anglo-Danish affair. It took place within the much broader context of a Europe at war from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. There had been a deterioration in relations between Britain and Denmark in the nine months before the British assault on Copenhagen, but this was not the fundamental cause of that assault. The real catalyst for the British attack on Denmark was the new alliance forged between Alexander I and Napoleon at Tilsit. That is why this book begins not in London or Copenhagen, but on the battlegrounds of eastern Prussia where French and Russian armies were locked in a desperate contest in the early summer of 1807.