

ADMIRAL BYNG'S TRIAL

Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann

30 January 1757

All England is again occupied with Admiral Byng; he and his friends were quite persuaded of his acquittal. The Court martial, after the trial was finished, kept the whole world in suspense for a week. They pronounced this extraordinary sentence: they condemn him to death for negligence, but acquit him of disaffection and cowardice, unanimously recommending him to mercy. Not being able in conscience to pronounce that he had done all he could, they had been forced to bring him in guilty, but beg he may be spared. The discussion and difference of opinions on this sentence are incredible. Some who make him the scapegoat for their own neglects, I fear, will try to complete his fate. He bore well his unexpected sentence, as he has all the outrageous indignities and cruelties heaped upon him....

13 February 1757

Byng's fate is still in suspense. The King would not pardon him. They would not execute the sentence, as many lawyers are clear that it is not a legal one. At last the council has referred it to the 12 judges to give their opinion: if not a favourable one, he dies! It will be difficult to persuade posterity that all the shame of last summer was the fault of Byng! Exact evidence of whose fault it was, I believe posterity will never have. The new Chief Justice and the late Chancellor pleaded against Byng like little attorneys, and did all they could to stifle truth. The great doubtfulness of his crime and the extraordinariness of his sentence, the persecution of his enemies, who sacrifice him for their own guilt and the rage of a blinded nation, have called forth all my pity for him. His enemies triumph; but who can envy the triumph of murder?

17 March 1757

Admiral Byng's tragedy was completed on Monday—a perfect tragedy, for there were variety of incidents, villany, murder, and a hero! His sufferings, persecutions, aspersion, disturbances, nay, the revolutions of his fate, had not in the least unhinged his mind; his whole behaviour was natural and firm. A few days before, one of his friends standing by him, said, 'Which of us is tallest?' He replied, 'Why this ceremony? I know what it means; let the man come and measure me for my coffin.' He said, that being acquitted of cowardice, and being persuaded on the coolest reflection that he had acted for the best, and should act so again, he was not unwilling to suffer. He desired to be shot on the quarter-deck, not where common malefactors are; came out at twelve, sat down in a chair, for he would not kneel, and refused to have his face covered, that his countenance might show whether he feared death; but being told that it might frighten his executioners, he submitted, gave the signal at once, received one shot through the head, another through the heart, and fell. Do cowards live or die thus? Can that man want spirit who only fears to terrify his executioners? Has the aspen Duke of Newcastle lived thus? Would my Lord Hardwicke die thus, even supposing he had nothing on his conscience?