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Gordon S. Brown, *The Captain Who Burned His Ships: Captain Thomas Tingey, USN, 1750-1829*. Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2011. Pp. viii, 200. ISBN 978-1-61251-044-6.

Review by Christopher McKee, The Newberry Library (mckee@grinnell.edu).

The historiography of the US Navy is rich in excellent biographies of officers who distinguished themselves as combat commanders at sea. It is, therefore, a particular pleasure to welcome this excellent life of a man who was a key shoreside administrator during the navy's early years.

This is not to say that Thomas Tingey lacked ample experience at sea. As a young man he served for some years as a midshipman in Britain's Royal Navy, which he left under ambiguous circumstances at the end of 1771. He then soon immigrated to Philadelphia, moving between that city and the West Indies in a variety of merchant marine postings, apparently without taking sides in the Revolutionary War. As part of the reviving and then booming American merchant trade of the 1780s and 1790s, Tingey commanded ships in the India trade. A skillful businessman, he amassed a comfortable personal fortune through these ventures. When the undeclared maritime war between France and the United States broke out in 1798 and the federal government scrambled to create a professional navy, Tingey's relatively short career in the Royal Navy made him a giant among pygmies. He easily obtained a captain's commission (3 September 1798) in the infant US Navy and commanded at sea successfully during the Quasi-War with France (1798-1801).

By 1800, the fifty-year-old Tingey was approaching the typical physical limit for an effective active command afloat. President John Adams and Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert decided to take advantage of his naval experience by assigning him to superintend the building of a 74-gun ship of the line at the site that later became the Washington Navy Yard. Although the projected seventy-four was not built for many years, it is Tingey's historically important nearly three decades as commandant of the navy yard (under various administrative arrangements) that form the core of *The Captain Who Burned His Ships*. President Thomas Jefferson and Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith intended to make Washington the center of the Navy's shore-based activities. Their motives were certainly mixed. At Washington, the Navy Department could keep a watchful eye on naval expenditures, always a target-of-opportunity for critics from within their own party. Equally, however, they wished to enhance the importance and stimulate the growth of the new national capital.

By the War of 1812, Washington's significance as *the* navy yard had diffused to other yards at Boston, New York, and Norfolk with immediate access to the Atlantic. But, for more than a decade, Tingey's domain had been the primary hub of naval ship construction and refitting—and the scene of some of the new nation's earliest labor unrest and agitation. The Washington yard's buildings and the ships under construction there were burned in 1814 to prevent their falling into enemy hands during the British attack on the city—hence the book's title. Rebuilt under Tingey's supervision beginning in 1815, the facility resumed a vital, but no longer premier, role in the nation's network of navy yards. The postwar years were frustrating for Tingey, since he was now less of a powerful independent agent. Like all navy yard commandants, he had to learn to tolerate a seemingly intrusive degree of supervision and control by the newly established three-man Board of Navy Commissioners. These powerful officers, all distinguished combat veterans, were determined to bring uniformity, probity, accountability, and professionalism to the operations of the chain of yards that now reported directly to the Board rather than the overstretched secretaries of the navy, as had been the case before and during the wartime years.

His contemporaries knew Tingey as a popular, congenial human being. But unlike iconic officers such as Thomas Truxtun and Isaac Hull, who live on through their lucid and colorful prose, not much of Tingey's lively personality comes across in his surviving correspondence. However, as anyone who has turned the pages of Washington's *National Intelligencer* for the first thirty years of the nineteenth century knows,

Tingey played a conspicuous role in the new capital's social, civic, and religious life. These important aspects of his personal world as well as a rich and complex family life are especially well covered by Brown.

Indeed, love of family also underlay one of the more questionable practices of Tingey's life: the awarding, through his purchasing authority, of noncompetitive contracts to relatives, whom he helped escape penalties when they failed to meet their contractual obligations. The author is not uncritical of his subject and his shortcomings—this is no hagiography!—but he is inclined to cut Tingey a lot of ethical slack, even for an era that allowed a degree of nepotism that would be considered criminal today. Tingey in fact pushed hard at the outer limits of the admittedly mushy conflict-of-interest standards of his time.

Historian Gordon Brown, a retired diplomat and US foreign service officer, has written four well-reviewed previous books. One of them, *Incidental Architect: William Thornton and the Cultural Life of Early Washington, D.C., 1794–1828*,<sup>1</sup> together with his personal familiarity with the city of Washington, have well prepared him to present Tingey not only as one more navy-absorbed officer, but also as a prominent figure in the young capital's vibrant social and cultural life. Though this is Brown's first venture into the navy's history, he makes only a tiny number of minor technical missteps.<sup>2</sup> One regret: while Brown carefully cites every document he quotes, he does not footnote intriguing background information that readers may wish to pursue. Thus, he refers to Capt. Moses Brown, USN, as “a sturdy New Englander who had led a colorful life as an officer in the Royal Navy, and as a merchant sailor, smuggler, privateer, and now a U.S. officer” (35). Unaware that Moses Brown was ever a British naval officer, I traced this statement back to Gordon Brown's likely (but uncited) source, a biography by Edgar Stanton Maclay,<sup>3</sup> and discovered that he has misinterpreted Maclay's description of Moses Brown accompanying a British naval expedition in a civilian capacity as evidence of his officer status in the Royal Navy.

These quibbles aside, *The Captain Who Burned His Ships* is a well organized, well written book and a pleasure to read. Its production values, too, meet the high standards of the Naval Institute Press.<sup>4</sup> Commodore Thomas Tingey has now secured a well-deserved place in the US Navy's historiography thanks to the diligent scholarship and narrative skills of his biographer, Gordon S. Brown.

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1. Athens: Ohio U Pr, 2009.

2. E.g., he calls John Orde Creighton a master commander (read “commandant”) on 128.

3. *Moses Brown, Captain U.S.N.* (NY: Baker and Taylor, 1904).

4. I noticed only two proofreading errors and one potential for confusion caused by the omission of the first name of one of the Barron brothers, James and Samuel.