Admiral Vernon and the War of Jenkins' Ear – by Simon Wilson



Anyone who has ever sorted through a coin dealer's junk box will be familiar with medallions similar to these. “Admiral Vernon” they tell us “Took Portobello with six ships only.” There are over 120 varieties of these medallions known, and Vernon was the most commemorated commoner of the 18th Century. But who remembers him now? The same goes for Portobello – now best known as the venue for a London antiques market, though two other Portobellos survive as suburbs of Dublin and Edinburgh.



Edward Vernon, was born in 1684, went to sea when he was 15 and died in 1757 after a successful naval career and three terms as an MP. He was in the British fleet on 22 October 1707 when Sir Cloudesley Shovell drowned, along with up to 2,000 of his men when several ships ran aground on the Scilly Isles. This led to a renewed interest in navigation within the Royal Navy, and, eventually, the invention of the chronometer.

Vernon was nicknamed Old Grog because he habitually wore a cloak made from grogram, a coarse mixed cloth made of wool and silk with a gum stiffening. He was responsible for diluting the rum ration of his men to reduce drunkenness and promote good health, a practice which other commanders then followed. His nickname was transferred to the diluted rum, and then to drink in general.

Meanwhile, another sailor was at the centre of events taking place in the Caribbean. Welsh sea Captain, Robert Jenkins, fell foul of Spanish coastguards in the West Indies in 1731. They were authorised to check British ships trading with their colonies, as much of the trade that was done was smuggled and duty was not paid. In a scuffle, one of his ears was allegedly sliced off by a Spanish cutlass. The local English authorities took the view that Jenkins was a smuggler and should expect such things as part of his chosen career. He spent the next eight years trying to obtain justice and is reputed to have appeared before Parliament brandishing a jar containing the pickled remains of the amputated appendage as he demanded retribution.

That was how the War of Jenkins' Ear eventually began in 1739. George II issued instructions for reprisals to be taken. Of course, the war was not really about an ear, it was about trade and European politics, the expansion of the colonies in America and factions in Parliament jockeying for position, which all sounds very familiar.

Vernon was chosen to lead the reprisals and his naval second in command, as depicted on one of these medals, was Commodore Brown.

The war had mixed results. They famously took Portobello with "six ships only", in 1739, as the medal says, and in the post-victory enthusiasm places were named after it, and the song *Rule Britannia* was written.

A successful attack was mounted on the port and fortress at Chagres, before moving on to another victory at Cartagena. Well, the medals struck at the time called it a victory. Cartagena was actually a defeat, and a costly one at that. False news and propaganda are not, it seems, inventions of the modern age.

What actually happened was that after the early victories against lightly defended targets, Vernon attacked Cartagena twice and was repulsed both times. After Drake's success in 1585 new fortifications were built. The French were able to take it again in 1697 due to sloppy Spanish organisation but by the time Vernon attacked, it had been extensively rebuilt and was considered to be one of the finest fortresses in the world.





The second expedition, with larger forces, proved to be a disaster.

Spanish resistance was robust at Cartagena and sickness swept through the British forces. By the end of the siege over half the British force was dead or suffering from disease, chiefly yellow fever, with approximately 10,000 dying. The old hands coped better than the newly arrived reinforcements as they already had a year in the tropics to build up their immunity. The "American Regiment", which did not have time to build up immunity, lost nearly 90% of its strength, one of the survivors being Captain Lawrence Washington. On his return he renamed his estate Mount Vernon after his ex-commander, which is how his step-brother George, the revolutionary General, came to live in a house named after a British naval officer.

Eventually, after successfully taking Guantanamo Bay, the expedition faltered as disease broke out again and Vernon and the Army commander – Thomas Wentworth – fell out. Both were recalled to London.

These events coincided with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the medallions were produced in their thousands. They were often poor quality, in both design and manufacture, being made rapidly, and cheaply by button manufacturers. They are an interesting series of medallions and still available at reasonable prices if you are happy with a worn one. In the case of the two examples

shown, one is in a reasonable state but has been cracked and mended at one time, and also converted to a brooch. This is probably what protected it from excessive wear. The second example is badly worn, and is typical of a medallion that has spent a lifetime being treated as a cheap curiosity. They are both, to be fair, around 300 years old, and the ravages of time are all part of their story.





They also serve as a reminder about the transitory nature of fame, commemorating men who are no longer known, who fought a war that is only remembered, if it is ever remembered, for its curious name. It's also a useful reminder about not believing everything you may see on a medallion.