



Thomas Cochrane, 10th Earl of Dundonald

'History can produce few examples of such a man and such achievements.' He was the last man in Britain to be sentenced to the pillory. He was jailed for fraud and escaped from prison. He was a radical politician, a talented inventor and, above all, one of the most formidable fighting sailors of his time.

Thomas Cochrane was born at Annsfield, near Hamilton, South Lanarkshire, Scotland, the son of Archibald Cochrane, 9th Earl of Dundonald. Cochrane had six brothers. Two served with distinction in the military: William Erskine Cochrane of the 15th Dragoon Guards, who served under Sir John Moore in the Peninsular War and reached the rank of major; and Archibald Cochrane, who became a captain in the Navy.

Cochrane was descended from lines of Scottish aristocracy and military service on both sides of his family. Through his uncle Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, the sixth son of the 8th Earl of Dundonald, Cochrane was cousin to his namesake Sir Thomas John Cochrane. Thomas Cochrane had a naval career and was appointed as Governor of Newfoundland and later Vice-Admiral of the United Kingdom. By 1793 the family fortune had been spent, and the family estate was sold to cover debts.

He joined the Royal Navy when he was 17 and after a six-year apprenticeship at sea was posted to the Mediterranean, one of the theatres in the war against France. Stuck on the flagship and bored, he fell out with his venal first lieutenant who accused Cochrane of disrespect and had him court-martialed. The admiral was furious with both of them. He acquitted Cochrane, but put a reprimand on his record. Inability to suffer fools gladly and hatred of corruption were two of Cochrane's characteristics and both would lead to him falling foul of the authorities throughout his career.

With a blot on his record, he was grudgingly given a command of *Speedy*, a brig of only 158 tons with 14 four-pounder guns. Cochrane found he could carry the shot for a full broadside in his pockets. He was ordered to cruise the coast of Spain in the western Mediterranean to raid coastal shipping. By using superb seamanship, meticulous planning, trickery and exemplary courage, within a year he captured more than 50 prizes and took 534 prisoners.

His most extraordinary feat was an attack on a Spanish frigate that ambushed him off Barcelona. The *Gamo* carried 319 men and 32 guns. With half the crew ferrying prizes, *Speedy* was down to 54 men and its puny guns were only effective within a 50-yard range. Instead of fleeing, Cochrane sailed straight at the frigate. It fired a broadside but *Speedy* was too close and the shot passed overhead. Cochrane spun his ship and crossed on the opposite side. He

timed it so that the frigate was on another roll, its broadside again flying harmlessly overhead. *Speedy*, triple-shotted, fired at point blank range when the swell pointed its guns upwards, straight into the *Gamo's* gun deck. He performed this maneuver three times. Then he boarded, his men with blacked faces to frighten and confuse their opponents. Their captain dead, the demoralized Spaniards surrendered and were herded below deck before they realized how few attackers there were. *Speedy* had three men killed against 15 Spaniards. Cochrane became a national hero, but he complained when he and his men lost a fortune through corruption in the prize court. The Admiralty, itself rotten right to the top, was not amused.

During the 14-month peace in Europe after the Treaty of Amiens in 1802, Cochrane studied moral philosophy at Edinburgh University. When hostilities resumed, he pestered the Admiralty for a ship and they sent him north of Shetland to do nothing but 'protecting the fisheries' for 15 months. The appointment of a Scot as First Lord of the Admiralty led to Cochrane being given the frigate *Pallas*. He created absolute terror down the French coast by burning signal stations, cutting ships from protected waters, destroying coastal fortifications, and disrupting trade and supply routes. Napoleon called him 'Le Loup des Mers' (The Wolf of the Seas).

In 1807 he took a month's leave and was elected as MP for Westminster, one of the two constituencies that elected by popular vote rather than being in the gift of some magnate. He immediately launched a ferocious attack against Admiralty corruption in the House of Commons. He was already considered a troublemaker and he was quickly ordered to sea. The Channel Fleet under Lord Gambier was blockading a French squadron in the Aix Roads off La Rochelle and Cochrane was sent to advise. He led an attack with 27 vessels, sending in fire ships and creating chaos. The French ships cut their cables and drifted on shore, but Gambier failed to follow up the attack and they were refloated the following day.

Gambier was offered a parliamentary vote of thanks for the victory. Cochrane was outraged and said so in the House of Commons. Gambier was court-martialed, but Cochrane was unable to present his side of the case and so the admiral was acquitted. Then his enemies were given a chance. In early 1814 – the year his brother ordered the burning of the White House, the Capital and the Library of Congress – Cochrane's uncle spread false rumors that Napoleon was dead and made huge sums shorting government stocks. Cochrane was innocently involved, but after the swindle was exposed he was tried for fraud. After being found guilty, he was stripped of his rank and honors, thrown out of the Commons, sentenced to the pillory (which was commuted), and jailed for a year. The public was furious and his constituents re-elected him, but it seemed his career was over.

But, in 1817, his reputation as a fighting sailor led to an invitation from the nascent government of Chile, asking for his help to throw off Spanish rule. Their navy controlled the west coast of South America. Cochrane arrived in November 1818 and found his ships consisted of one captured frigate and half a dozen converted merchantmen.

Cochrane never ordered a flogging. His charisma, his victories and the low casualties in his crews meant that he easily recruited experienced American and British sailors to his vessels. His qualities made him a barracuda against a shoal of Spanish herrings and his enemies knew it. He organized a typical campaign, raiding shipping, attacking forts and destroying coastal fortifications. He captured the *Esmeralda*, the most powerful remaining Spanish ship, which left the Spanish unable to reinforce their troops and helpless. On his own initiative he sailed north to Peru, beat up the coastline and forced the Spanish authorities to surrender.

Having been instrumental in the independence of both Peru and Chile, which still has a warship named after him, he sailed around the Horn to Rio in 1823 where the young emperor Pedro employed him against the Portuguese fleet that still controlled the north of the country. Cochrane had four serviceable ships, but chased a fleet of 13 Portuguese warships and 32 transports that fled up the coast before him. Cochrane sailed ahead of them and bluffed the two remaining strongholds under Portuguese control to surrender, saying that he had already destroyed their fleet. It had taken him just three months to deliver the northern half of the country to the emperor.

Cochrane returned home in 1830, a national hero once again, and received the salute due to an admiral at Spithead.

His last fling was taking command of the Greek navy in its fight for independence against Turkey. His name inspired terror in his opponents and forced the great powers to become involved.

He returned to England and inherited the earldom of Dundonald in 1831. In 1832, he was pardoned by the Crown and reinstated in the Royal Navy. He died in 1860 with the rank of Admiral of the Red, a national treasure.

His life and exploits inspired the naval fiction of 19th- and 20th-century novelists, particularly the figures of C. S. Forester's *Horatio Hornblower* and Patrick O'Brian's protagonist Jack Aubrey.