This idea for this book emerged when I started reading the private journal of Richard Carr McClement in the Scottish Catholic Archives in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 2009. McClement was an Irish Catholic surgeon in the Royal Navy between 1857 and 1871. His journal was never supposed to leave the family; his son, Freddie, had taken it with him when he entered the Benedictine monastery at Fort Augustus in the Scottish Highlands in the 1880s. When the monastery closed in 1998, the journal and many other historical papers were transferred to Edinburgh.

Richard McClement recorded, with fascinating detail, the experiences that shaped his time in the navy. These included the enslaved people he saw and their Portuguese captors, the conditions in which the enslaved people were kept, and the inspections he was required to undertake as a medical professional when the Royal Navy captured a slaver off the West African coast. He also wrote about his responsibilities in various naval hospitals, including the one at Halifax, his sense of belonging within a growing naval medical community, and what it felt like to be either the only or one of the few Catholic officers on board. Like many naval officers, Richard’s story became part of a much larger family tradition, but his stands out because the tradition started with him. Given prohibitions against joining the ranks of the officer class during the penal law era, a Catholic officer culture was in its infancy in the 1850s. When Richard’s younger brother, Frederick, also became a naval surgeon, a family tradition, which continues to this day, was cemented. That each generation of this family has been sending men to sea since the middle of the nineteenth century is something I would never have known had Frederick’s grandson, Chris McClement, not stumbled upon some of my work when researching his family’s history. Sadly, Chris died of lung cancer in 2012, but his enthusiasm for this
research was inspirational, and I would like to begin by thanking him, posthumously, for his friendship and curiosity.

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