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The Foundations of Naval History: John Knox Laughton, the Royal Navy and the Historical Profession

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Roger Knight

'He probably knows more naval history than any English speaking man living. Pity he don't produce a great work instead of piddling about in the byways of naval history'. So wrote Alfred Thayer Mahan to Stephen Luce in 1890 about John Knox Laughton. Mahan, the American naval captain whose books were reputedly kept next to the Kaiser's bed, has always interested historians and his influence, personality and authority has been the subject of lively debate for many years. Of Laughton almost nothing is known. He never did produce that great work before his death in 1915. As he did not start writing naval history until he was forty-five and did not start a civilian academic career at King's College London until he was fifty-five, he did not have the luxury of a full career. At first sight, therefore, the title of this intriguing book seems exaggerated and Professor Lambert, also of King's College, has to make a strong case to put forward Laughton as 'the man who founded the modern discipline' (p. 11); and just as strong a case needs to be made for it being a continuous, identifiable 'discipline' from then to now.

Born in 1830, John Knox Laughton, a mathematically-trained civilian naval instructor in HM Ships, served in the Baltic War and in the operations against the Chinese in the late 1850s. He came ashore in 1866 to teach at the Royal Naval College at Portsmouth. He moved with the College to Greenwich in 1873, as Head of the Department of Meteorology and Marine Surveying; but in 1876 he gave his first historical lecture. In 1885 he left the navy and became Professor of Modern History at King's which he held until 1914. In 1893 he became Secretary of the Navy Records Society and was knighted in 1907. Laughton wrote nine books and many essays and reviews, listed by Lambert in a five-page bibliography, and almost all of them are curiosities now. He also wrote hundreds of biographies of naval officers for the *Dictionary of National Biography*

, a feat for which he can be admired at least for his stamina. Lambert faithfully describes this great labour, noting those reputations over which Laughton's objectivity slipped badly, demonstrating the fragility of the 'scientific history' by which the late Victorians judged themselves. Chief amongst the casualties were the characters and careers of Admiral Sir Charles Napier and Lord Sandwich, the latter in particular offending Laughton's moral susceptibilities. Now that these biographies are being revised and rewritten for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, the suspicion that they needed overhauling long ago has been amply confirmed.

So what is the significance of Laughton on history as it is written today? It can hardly be more than nominal. From the perspective of a hundred years, three men, Mahan, Sir Julian Corbett and Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, dominated the historiography of Anglo-American naval history between the years of the German challenge to British naval power in the 1880s and the Second World War. Their books are still stimulating and, in the case of Corbett's *England in the Seven Years War* (1907) and Richmond's three-volume *The Navy in the War of 1739-48* (1920), not superseded. The level of interest in their work is such that in the early 1990s well-attended conferences devoted solely to their work were held in America and proceedings published (1991, 1993). By comparison, Laughton was not a revolutionary thinker, nor did he develop a body of tactical or strategic thought. His mathematical thought process, combined with his conservatism, did not lead to newer and larger generalisations and thus new and original views were wanting. In 1888 G. P. Gooch found Laughton's lectures 'rather uninspiring, for he conceived of history as a record of events than a panorama of the many-sided life of humanity' (p. 82). Every circumstance, financial, domestic and intellectual, militated against Laughton writing the big book. In the opinion of Don Schurman, who wrote an admirably balanced essay on Laughton thirty-five years ago: 'What was missing was the quality of playing imagination, the lyrical quality of the prose artist and the completeness of approach which comes from the mind which was naturally philosophical' (p. 84, *The Education of a Navy*, 1965).

How then did a historian who did not write a major work found a discipline? Laughton was not the first professor to lecture on naval history, for since 1862 a naval officer, Montagu Burrows, had held the Chichele Professorship of Modern History at Oxford, and often lectured on naval subjects. Curiously, when reviewing Laughton's first book *Studies in Naval History* (1887) in the *English Historical Review*, Burrows himself saw a continuity of tradition in the book from the naval history of William James's in the 1820s. In fact, Laughton's main contribution was institutional. Through his influence upon senior naval officers whom he had taught earlier in their careers, he was able to gain access to the Admiralty records at the Public Record Office (now the National Archives of the UK), hitherto closed, in 1889. Only six years after the founding of the *English Historical Review*, he was the force behind the founding of the Navy Records Society in 1893. It was at this time that he was very much influenced by S. R. Gardiner, who taught him much. It was also at this time came into contact with Alfred Mahan, and his influence on the younger man, and upon others, concludes Lambert, was Laughton's great contribution. Rather than 'a polemical output', it was 'long-term influence and personal contact' (p. 193). He certainly influenced other, greater minds, in particular Richmond, to whom he passed on his original commission on the 1739-48 war and which the Admiral so brilliantly finished.

This raises a further question. If the nature of John Knox Laughton's achievement rested on personal influence, what manner of man was he? Clearly, the force of his personality was critical in what he achieved, whether it was getting access to the public records, or founding a scholarly society and winning high-powered backing for it. However, Lambert's research and writing reveals little, beyond the fact that Laughton was clearly a driven and obsessive character. Scholarly controversies with Oscar Browning and F. P. Badham are well told here, and Laughton was capable retaining grudges; but the lack of personal documentary evidence has made the author's task difficult. We are not told, for instance, the name of his second wife, Maria Josefa, merely that she was Spanish. It is made clear that his large second family and the financial strain which this imposed constituted a real constraint on the time for reflection of an elderly man. It is no coincidence now that this broad church has begun to be embraced by the academic community. There are now five postgraduate institutes specialising in various aspects of maritime history. In the last year, two naval scholars (one of them Lambert himself) and one maritime historian have been appointed to

personal chairs, while the Institute of Historical Research is seeking funding to establish a chair in maritime history.

This is a single-minded book about a single-minded man. It is written to bring out of obscurity a scholar who, in the retrospective thought recently given to the study of naval power, has been undervalued. It is thought provoking and always interesting and it reflects a dilemma which needs to be faced today, as Andrew Lambert makes clear in his introduction, 'how to balance the divergent strains of academic rigour and service education' (p. 11). While Laughton was part of a generation which brought new rigour to the study of the past, there is no doubt on which side of that balance he belonged. Schurman, whose 1965 essay should be read alongside this book, concludes that 'his outlook seems to have remained that of a naval officer' (p.108). Even the despised Callendar saw the point in the conclusion to his *DNB* article on Laughton: 'Mahan, admittedly one of Laughton's disciples, startled the world with his complete edifice of historical philosophy in the very hour which Laughton dug down to the foundations on which alone such an edifice could be safely erected'. John Knox Laughton might have dug some foundations, but he did not found a discipline.

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