

Review Article: Naval History of Britain

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In the bicentenary year of Trafalgar it is appropriate to remember that the history of Britain, its current situation and future prospects reflect an overwhelming geographical fact. Britain is a collection of islands at once alongside, but not attached to the European Continent. Despite that, the study of naval history was either ignored or deprecated by the historical profession for decades, left on the margins by the arcane knowledge that it required, and the apparent irrelevance of the naval power in the Cold War. By contrast the military history of the British Isles, a subject of largely parochial concern for almost the whole of recorded history, was a significant growth area. There are still far more historians of armies at work in British universities than there are of navies. This curious state of affairs has been reversed of late, with the

appearance of sophisticated, inclusive works on key areas of wider historical debate; naval historians have joined these debates, while others have drawn on naval evidence to develop their own concerns. This sporadic development required a major text to establish the case for naval history, it need wait no longer.

These two books are the opening and central volume of a trilogy, *The Safeguard of the Sea*, which first appeared in 1997, begins in 660 and takes a far from rosy view of the costly, painful and only occasionally successful development of naval power in the British Isles. Hoary old myths about King Alfred and Henry VIII are challenged, along with the central assumption of modern authors that an insular location made British kingdoms safer from invasion. In reality, before the eighteenth-century, navies were far better at invading than defending, as William I and William III, amongst others, so ably demonstrated. The underlying progress of naval power as an instrument of state policy, and the wide-ranging consequences that flowed for any state attempting to use such a complex and costly instrument provide the narrative with an analytical core. Before 1066 an embryonic, but significant, English naval power bound the Celtic fringe to England in a mutually beneficial relationship, only to be destroyed by the advent of militaristic Norman imperialism, which replaced inclusive political connection with armoured cavalry, castles and cultural subjugation. The failure of the Norman kings to sustain a serious naval capability left their kingdoms open to invasion, just as their ambitions drew England into European politics.

In his account of the early period, Rodger takes a far broader view of what constituted naval activity in the British Isles than that of his predecessors, stressing that his is not a history of the Royal Navy as an organisation. Instead he demonstrates how the development of modern naval power was a long and costly business: naval power required more than ships. Without trained officers and men, effective infrastructure and resources over the long term navies invariably withered, and the period from 1066 to the sixteenth century is littered with short lived attempts to sustain a naval impulse; not until the reign of Elizabeth did the English possess an effective sea force that could, if only just, defend them. The key to this development lay in the economic pull of international commerce, and the political weight of those who traded by sea in the limited monarchy that emerged. Without an adequate source of independent funds the crown was forced to call on parliament, and parliament was quick to ensure the crown spent the money that it raised on matters of commercial interest. While many have considered the impact of a 'military revolution' with standing armies and extensive fortifications on the growth of the modern state, the political impact of naval power was more significant. The modern bureaucratic state was built to raise and disburse money on a large scale, over long periods. This was the central requirement for naval mastery. Standing armies, large and costly as they were, could be created relatively quickly by comparison with effective navies. The naval revolution of the late sixteenth century played a key role in the creation of the modern English/British state, and continued to dominate the development of national policy. *Safeguard* ends with the Navy divided by a Civil War in part brought about by a royal attempt to raise funds for the navy independent of Parliament. It was only with the rosy hindsight of subsequent, more successful, generations that historians could manufacture a coherent whiggish version of the English/British naval past, filled glorious success and steady progress from such materials.

Not only has Professor Rodger unravelled the tangled skein of older naval histories, in itself a long overdue task, but more significantly he has replaced them with a more broadly based, inclusive and historically informed narrative. The sheer scale and comprehensive quality of *The Safeguard of the Seas* has made it a landmark. While some aspects of the subject, naval and related, had already been examined, to achieve an effective overview extensive original research was required. The melding of these two streams of knowledge into a single, intellectually coherent, skilfully written and compelling narrative made it an immediate success. The re-appearance of *Safeguard* in paperback to coincide with the publication of the second volume is both welcome and timely – there is no excuse for ignorance at this price.

The Command of the Ocean follows the original in many ways, the key differences being the relative strength of the extant literature on this period, which has reduced the scope for new research, and rapid disappearance of any other naval forces in the British Isles, leaving the Royal Navy as the undisputed focus of attention. For the seasoned student of eighteenth-century naval history there will be sections of the book that have a familiar ring. The reason for this is that two of the standard books, and a host of important

articles on which this account is based, were written by Professor Rodger. Elsewhere the lively debates prompted by the conduct and consequences of the American Revolutionary War, the career of Admiral Lord Nelson, and the role of naval power in the Napoleonic conflict are addressed, and the conclusions manage to combine an eye for detail with clear and coherent judgment.

At the outset Professor Rodger declares that his object is 'to put naval affairs back into the history of Britain' (p. lxiii). Rather than a history of the Royal Navy, this is a British history, in which the Royal Navy is the central, but not necessarily the most important, figure. Instead naval history is connected with many other approaches to the British past – politics, diplomacy, trade, finance, social, technical, administrative, agricultural, medical and religious among others – to create a better understanding of the purposes for which so many battles were fought, and so many ships built. The central issue in this volume is the maintenance of naval dominance in European waters, which is characterised as 'the largest, longest, most complex and expensive project ever undertaken by the British state and society. Few aspects of national life were unaffected by it, and no history of Britain can be complete which ignores it' (p. lxv).

Both books proceed in four distinct but interwoven strands, covering policy, strategy and operations; finance, logistics and administration; the social history of officers and men; and the ships and systems that they employed. Each strand can be read alone, or followed throughout the whole text. The two books have been very well produced; the maps alone put other publishers to shame, while the illustrations are liberal and well chosen. Both conform to the old maxim about pictures and words, which for a text of this scale is quite a tribute. The scholarly apparatus are equally powerful, which is exactly what is required in a work that will be consulted for decades by students and scholars ignorant of the basics, and needing the guidance it offers. The index of *Command* runs to forty pages, the sources to ninety, the endnotes one hundred, and the glossary thirty.

There is so much to read and consider in a book of this scale and ambition that it is necessary to keep both the global and the specific in view. For many years serious naval history came in two forms, the first a narrowly focussed professional study suitable for the education of admirals and the generation of naval doctrine, the second a narrative approach that retailed events, but ignored their wider context. Only occasionally did such works reach a wider historical audience. The best known work in the field, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, published in 1890, reflected many things, but historical scholarship was not on the list. Mahan, then teaching strategy and tactics to American naval officers, simply published his lectures, which were a carefully crafted argument for the United States to acquire a battlefleet navy. The book found a ready audience around the world because imperial rivalries had transformed the market for navies.

In the same decade *The Times* naval correspondent William Laird Clowes launched his project to compile a narrative history of the Royal Navy. Eventually published in seven massive volumes, with many authors, the ponderous, antiquarian appearance of Clowes's work ensured that it remained on library shelves. It was condemned by serious historians because it had illustrations rather than footnotes, and made few concessions to the needs of scholars in other areas of historical study. In the interval several complete histories have been essayed, but the scale and complexity of the task has hitherto seen such efforts repeat Clowes's approach, relying on a team of authors to write a single volume history of the Royal Navy. The end of empire and naval supremacy left British naval history without natural focus, or any sense of purpose. Always a marginal feature in the historical profession, it seemed to be slipping away, outmoded and irrelevant.

After 1945 the combination of nuclear threat, post-imperial retreat, European integration and economic malaise led many historians to ignore the meaning of the sea for Britain. The sea no longer connected Britain to her colonies, nor ensured her security. The movement of trade by sea suddenly disappeared from the national consciousness as distant container terminals replaced downtown docks and old fashioned manual labour. Air travel killed off the last long distance passenger services, leaving the sea as a pleasant holiday backdrop. In 1966 the order for a large new aircraft carrier was cancelled, the country could not afford it and there were higher priorities for defence spending. Soon the navy had no capital ships and no role outside the NATO area. By the early 1970s a 'declinist' view had taken hold, it was all over with Britain, and

consequently her unique national arm, the Royal Navy, was an irrelevance that could be examined with all the detachment of a exhumed skeleton.

In 1976 Paul Kennedy rose to the challenge of imposing a coherent pattern on the subject: his *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* remains a landmark in naval history as the first large scale post-imperial text that integrated the navy with the fortunes of the state. The work was informed by economic analysis, and a belief that the subjects under review, Britain and the Royal Navy had reached a state of terminal decrepitude such that their past could be now assessed free of any concern that they might have a future.

But much has happened since then – economic recovery, the Falklands conflict, the end of the Cold War, and new global perspectives have restored the Royal Navy to the centre of current defence planning. Two new aircraft carriers have been ordered, each larger than the one cancelled in 1966. Perhaps history is not circular after all.

Against this shifting backdrop and seeming reversal of fortune, naval history re-emerges, not as a slightly bombastic catalogue of glory, leading to the majestic fleet that appeared for Edward VII's coronation review in 1902, but as a subject that has grown up and now confidently examines the relative lack of success of the service, the problems that limited the application of naval power in European warfare, and the place of naval activity in national history.

After all, naval history was hardly a suitable subject for a university based historian, and modern navies preferred to chase contemporary relevance. It should be stressed that Professor Rodger began this project as an independent scholar, and something of that detachment survives in the book. It does not make a parade of its agendas, nor does it show much concern for academic fashion. Instead it addresses the large, growing market for original naval history that has sustained the subject for many years, as well as the academic community for whom it will be such a boon.

The success of the book as a powerful analytical narrative reflects many qualities. The range of sources is striking, both in the sheer scale of material now available for the period. By the eighteenth century the Royal Navy was regularly dealing with the full range of European nations, and not a few outside, echoed here in Rodger's adept handling of the scholarly output of France and Spain, Portugal and Holland, the Scandinavian powers, Russia, Italian and German states, not to mention Turkey. Similarly the domestic background is not stinted; this should be the end of any old fashioned nonsense that armed forces, ancient or modern, can be considered as organisations distinct from the society they serve. The Royal Navy reflected the strengths and weaknesses of the state, from the poverty-stricken finances of the Stuart Restoration to the drinking culture that shattered the constitutions of so many officers and men in the eighteenth century.

While there is much to instruct and enlighten naval historians of Britain and other powers, the greatest merit of this work will be the impact that it has on other branches of historical scholarship in Britain. No longer will it possible for historians to be ignorant of the naval dimension of British history, of the central role of the Royal Navy in the development of the state and its bureaucracy, of its ships, people, supplies and dockyards, its politics and its costs. Throughout the period under review the Royal Navy was the largest item on the national budget, and its roots were deep in the country, indeed the National Debt was created to keep it running. Nor does the conclusion disappoint. Rodger outlines the main theories that have sustained analysts of the utility or otherwise of naval power to the British in war and peace, and demolishes them all as outmoded and ahistorical, prisoners of their age and their authors. Instead he develops an approach in which the Reformation produced an insecurity, both real and imagined, that propelled the state to develop and sustain a Navy configured for insular security, even if it was frequently unable to deliver. The idea that sea power is the product of democracies, made popular by the American strategic analyst Mahan in 1890, had deep roots – it was an Athenian boast in the days of Aristotle – is similarly cast aside. Unlikely heroes emerge: Charles II and James II created an effective navy, but lacked the money to employ it effectively. Parliamentary control proved to be less competent, but provided access to far larger financial resources.

The creation of a powerful fiscal state, combined with democratic control, provided the post-1688 navy with

finances to fight for more than two seasons. The eighteenth-century navy was funded and run by Parliament, which made it popular in a way that the king's army never could be. The necessary resources were provided by overseas trade, and it was the intimate link with commerce, the key economic growth area, that ensured its popularity with the City of London. The same qualities that made the City prosperous, a flexible society and significant capital to generate extensive overseas trade, ensured the navy had the finances and logistics to develop from a local force for the summer in the Channel to the first truly global instrument of power. The capabilities of the service expanded to secure the interests of commerce, and while this connection was acknowledged on both sides, the prosperity and power of the British state were securely grounded. Only when the navy lost sight of commercial imperatives would Britain face disaster. But that would be to anticipate the final volume. Instead we should end, as Professor Rodger does, in 1815 when the Royal Navy had no rival, no equal: it had 'the Command of the Ocean' and would not be tested again for another century.

The Command of the Ocean has earned laudatory reviews in the quality press and strong sales, testament to the power and quality of a work that augurs well for naval history in the twenty-first century. A subject once isolated and dispersed has been mastered, organised and given a form that it will retain for many years to come. Above all this is a work that both sets the baseline for all future research, and opens the next round of debate.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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The Guardian

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