

History of the Royal Navy

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These three volumes are the first titles in an ambitious new series from I.B.Tauris. The series, *A History of the Royal Navy*, is being produced in association with the National Museum of the Royal Navy and its intention, according to the editors' forward, is to throw 'new light on almost every aspect of Britain's Royal Navy' from 1660 to the present day. Not all the titles are announced, but the basic intention is to provide the reader with broad chronological narrative volumes covering each century (divided by convenient events rather than by strict dating) and other, themed, volumes to pick up specific conflicts, or aspects, of naval history. The three volumes considered here represent the narrative of 1900-2010 and two of the most significant conflicts, the Napoleonic Wars and the Second World War. Although there are occasional cross-

references between volumes they are self-contained works and should be considered independently.

Turning first to *The Royal Navy : A History since 1900*, it is clear that the authors have got a job to do. They have to bring readers, who almost certainly have a firm idea of what they think is significant in the Royal Navy's past, through more than one hundred years of history, present those readers with relatively new research, particularly for periods which are less well-known, and challenge some widely of their cherished assumptions. Nearly thirty per cent of the book is devoted to the six years of the Second World War. Just under forty per cent to the period from 1900 to 1939 and under thirty per cent to the sixty-five years from 1945 to 2010. This distribution probably reflects the interest of the main audience and there are other good reasons for it, but whether it is ideal to meet the authors' other serious objective is another matter.

The main point emphasised by the authors is that sea power is not generally understood by the public (and even by planners, for that matter). Its operations are usually out of the public gaze. Blockade and diplomatic suasion are generally invisible to the public not experiencing its effects. Power projection is very seldom exercised in isolation from other military or diplomatic tools – the results of air strikes and boots on the ground are more easily communicated than the sea-basing that makes much of it possible. In a democratic society the distribution of critical resources and establishing the principles of a national defence posture rest upon an ability to convince the public and its representatives of the logic and necessity of long-term investment trajectories. The relative invisibility of the navy does not help its case. Nor is the Royal Navy, as an institution, good at Whitehall politicking. Rhetorical devices such as crying wolf or appealing to traditions have little purchase in the long term. Public understanding is the only prospect for the sustainable maintenance of effective sea power. Thus, the authors' set out to show how sea power worked across the century; how it has been a vital, flexible element in Britain's defence as diplomatic and military challenges changed ; and how it remains essential today.

The first section of the book, up to the beginning of the First World War, focuses on the way the navy responded to the growing threat from Germany. Naturally, Admiral Sir John Fisher dominates this part. Familiar themes are covered such as the re-distribution of the fleet to Home Waters, the technological shifts with the *Dreadnought* and the battle cruiser concepts. The debates concerning Fisher's command and intentions are covered. The debilitating quarrel with Lord Charles Beresford, the debate over the purpose of flotilla defence and the re-configured squadrons are presented. The proper use of the fleet in war was also a matter of contention. Winning command of the seas, as Britain had done at Trafalgar in 1805, was a relatively uncontroversial objective, but what to do with sea power once it was secured remained unclear. Fisher's inability (and that of his successor, Sir Arthur Wilson) to construct a coherent vision of that purpose played an important part in the loss, of the argument with the army, between 1903 and 1911, concerning Britain's proper role in a future conflict with Germany.

The public lack of understanding of what their navy could and should do carried on into the First World War. The claims for the effectiveness of the blockade formulated before 1914 proved hopelessly optimistic. The public, as expressed in the title of this chapter, expected another Trafalgar and all the good things they assumed would follow from it. The decisive battle never came so there was never the need to answer the question about what was to be done with guaranteed sea control in north European waters. There was no Trafalgar, and despite the vital contribution of the Royal Navy towards sustaining the armies fighting in France, maintaining food and fuel supplies to Britain and France, and, ultimately, crushing German morale by effective blockade, the achievement and the sacrifice looked meagre compared to the suffering of the allied armies and their eventual victory over the summer and autumn of 1918. The key controversies and themes of the period are covered. The submarine campaign and the adoption of convoy, the fire-control debate (developed further in the following chapter) and the performance of the Grand Fleet at Jutland in May 1916 are all well covered. The navy's contribution to aerial warfare, the production of the tank and raiding the Belgian coasts also find a place. It is here that the *bête noire* of the story first makes its appearance – the Royal Air Force (RAF). The Royal Navy's relations with the RAF have been fraught to say the least and this theme starts with the formation of that service in 1918 when there was a distinct shift in outlook away from naval requirements.

The debates about the Royal Navy between the wars are dealt with very briefly. Demobilisation and small operations are covered. The impact the failure to replicate Trafalgar had on the service and the public are discussed. Sections on the Washington Treaty, the Ten Year Rule, developments in submarines and aircraft are all here. Traditionally, the interwar years are seen as underfunded and unimaginative for all the services. Consequently, they do not attract the general reader. In reality this was a major period adjustment, learning and development. The underfunding certainly existed. This was and is a real constraint on preparing for effective operations in an uncertain context. Usually, little justice is done to the officers of all services who spend their lives in this environment, but learning and adjusting enough to meet what is almost inevitably going to be a surprising operational context is a major contribution to sustainable military power. Given that the Royal Navy performed so much better during the Second World War than the First, it is a pity that some more space could not have been devoted to this important period.

The history of the Second World War dominates the book. The chapters, divided geographically, take the reader through the various theatres and campaigns. The key controversy for the general reader is sure to be the contention that the Battle of Britain was not won in the air but at sea. The Royal Navy was never called to fight it because it had already been won – the Germans could not maintain an invasion with the Royal Navy in control of the Channel. Air power would not have broken this control. The argument is persuasive, but this is the point at which it is most evident that the book is very much a history of the Royal Navy as it sees itself. No room is found for the counter-arguments that would help the reader understand why this was not understood by the public at the time or since. The rest of this section is uncontentious, well presented, referenced and balanced. It contains all the key narratives that one would expect or hope for.

The post-war period saw the Royal Navy contracting again. The ability to maintain a balanced fleet in the face of world-wide commitments and the constant operational needs of NATO imposed huge strains on the service. With nuclear weaponry and the European Central Front overshadowing the debates about operational capabilities, the navy had to fight hard for public understanding of its role. The complexities of the global Cold War stand-off, lasting half a century, were not entirely clear to contemporaries and there is no space in this volume for exploring them in detail. Hence, the impact of the rise of Soviet oceanic sea power is implied rather than tackled directly as a factor in British naval calculations. Spending review after spending review, and ad hoc cuts, were constant challenges. However, the authors make clear that the navy succeeded far better than might have been anticipated. The Royal Navy did not always make its political case well, suffered some losses, but, comparatively, preserved its capabilities. The champions of naval air power suffered bruising battles with the Treasury and the RAF, but succeeded in maintaining a fixed wing capability to 2010 and a promise of its return with the new carriers in the 2020s. The nuclear deterrent, operated by the Royal Navy since 1969 has been protected and upgraded (sometimes without public

knowledge). Amphibious capability and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary suffered peaks and troughs, but have come through, thanks in part to circumstances (such as the Falklands War of 1982), tenacity and effective lobbying. The end of the Cold War in 1990 did not produce a peace dividend as the fragmentation of power blocs only extended the range and variety of conflicts. The history of interventions from 1990s, such as the Balkans, the Gulf Wars, Afghanistan and Libya, give the authors plenty of scope to show how the Royal Navy has provided a flexible and effective response over time and environments. The case of the Libyan intervention in 2011 allows the authors a final opportunity to point out that for Britain, lacking a carrier-based strike capability, the air campaign was far less effective and more expensive than it was for either France or the United States which were operating from aircraft carriers.

Overall this book sets out to do what is intended. It is a well-written and supported narrative history of the Royal Navy between 1900 and 2010. It is a clear, up-to-date picture of the Royal Navy – largely, it must be admitted, through its eyes. Having said that, it is by no means a hagiography. It uses recent research and debates to show very clearly the weaknesses of the navy, how it strove to resolve them and acknowledges where it failed. The authors have had to make compromises, probably to accommodate readers' expectations of a substantial recounting of the period 1939-1945, but they have successfully touched on all the main themes and debates. They demonstrate that the Royal Navy has been a highly effective, flexible force and go a long way towards their objective of demonstrating the relevance of sea power to Britain's twentieth-century history.

The volume *A History of the Royal Navy : World War II* takes up the narrative outlined above and develops it more detail. The opening contention, that 'World War II was above all a maritime war' (p.1,) is important both as a matter of fact and positioning for this work. The contribution of the Royal Navy to victory is central to the narrative and showing how the allies used global sea power is at the core of this volume. The work is, essentially, a review of the operations that contributed to this victory. However, it is a pity that some space could not have been devoted to examining this initial statement in the wider context. Most readers will be aware that, ultimately, the German Army bled to death on the Eastern Front and that this, more than anything else, sealed the fate of the Third Reich. However, the link between this massive land campaign and sea power is not so well known and it is something that really needs clarity and perspective for the modern reader. The Arctic Convoys are covered as operations as is the opening of the second front in Sicily/Italy in 1943, but the strategic implications of either are not explored, so the significance of this initial contention is left open.

At its heart, this book provides an excellent narrative that guides the reader chronologically through the campaigns. The pre-war period is explored. The difficulties faced by the Royal Navy after 1918 provide a backdrop to the challenges of 1939/40. The failure to produce another Trafalgar during the First World War, despite overwhelming surface force superiority, hit public confidence in the navy. The untried, but exciting, claims by the proponents of aerial bombing, promising cheaper and more decisive results, were attractive to the public and the Treasury. Nonetheless, this is not a story of unmitigated public and political neglect. By 1939, as Redford makes clear, the Royal Navy was in far better condition to fight a modern war than it had the right to expect in 1932. The reasons why this was the case are not fully explored, but the significant material changes are clearly pointed out - ranging from new aircraft carriers and modernisation programmes to an emerging radar technology. Important organisational changes, such as the return of the Fleet Air Arm to Admiralty control and the development of the Operational Intelligence Centre are also highlighted.

Once the war had broken out, the major operations, deployments and battles are all covered in a highly readable and accessible manner. The author, an authority on submarine warfare, is particularly strong on the campaign against the U-Boats, which constitutes, rightly, the largest single subject within the text. For both this vital anti-submarine campaign and the British submarine effort in the Mediterranean, the secondary and primary references are extremely useful. The use of tables and maps also adds greatly to the narrative.

The intention of the work is also to explode some myths. The problem with myths is that they are not easily dislodged and the degree of argument and evidence needed to expose them varies tremendously. Inevitably,

in a relatively short work like this, some myths are better dealt with than others. The contribution of the 'little ships' at Dunkirk is neatly put into context (p.31-33). The importance of the 'little ships' to contemporary propaganda is not allowed to deflect the fact that Royal Navy destroyers, large merchant ships, good weather and the availability of the mole at Dunkirk were the key factors that enabled the bulk of the British Expeditionary Force and some of its allies to escape.

The myths that attract most attention are those associated with the RAF. Running throughout the text is the tension that existed between the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. The weakness of the Middle East Air Force in the face of Italian air power meant that air defence in the Mediterranean relied very heavily on the co-ordinated use of aircraft carriers from Gibraltar and Alexandria. The neglect of Coastal Command by the RAF and, particularly, the delays in providing Very Long Range (VLR) aircraft until early 1943 are important aspects of the Battle of the Atlantic. Some of the worst features of this were mitigated when Coastal Command came under Admiralty control in February 1941, but the battle with the RAF over proper equipment remained a problem. Behind the RAF's resistance lay its faith in the bombing campaign against Germany and this is one myth that comes in for its fair share of comment. The ineffectiveness of the early night bombing and the excessive optimism about its impact later in the war are contrasted with what appropriate air power might have done to secure the Atlantic sea lanes.

Perhaps the most sacred myth challenged is that of the Battle of Britain, mentioned in the general volume covering the twentieth century. The argument is developed in more detail here (pp.96-99). The air battle over southern England is given its place, but fundamentally an invasion was deterred not by the failure to secure air control, but by the impossibility of achieving adequate sea control for long enough to bring about a British capitulation. There is more to the argument and to the reasoning as to why the role of RAF in the campaign was emphasised than is presented here. Given that this is probably the most significant and deeply held myth that Redford challenges, more detailed explanation might help avoid the conclusion by some readers that this is a navalist apologia.

Some other myths might also have been challenged rather more. The section on the disaster at Dieppe (Operation Jubilee, 19th August 1942) concludes that lessons were learned that were vital to the success of Operations Neptune and Overlord (6th June 1944) (p.125). This was the view that Vice Admiral Louis Mountbatten (Director of Combined Operations Head Quarters at the time of Operation Jubilee) steadfastly maintained from first to last. There were, and are, sceptics, not least, Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, who was responsible for the planning of Operation Neptune. Dieppe remains one of those contested aspects of the war, particularly among Canadian scholars, that is worthy of a full examination from the naval perspective. Similarly, the despatch and destruction of Force Z (December 1941), and the fall of Singapore (February 1942) are contested events that really could do with a clear, concise recapitulation of the arguments and exposure of myths.

Overall, it is not exploding myths that provide the real value of this volume. Rather, the reader is given a valuable précis of naval operations during the war with maps and illustrations that reinforce the text. Redford concludes that the Royal Navy, effectively single-handedly, achieved control of the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Indian Ocean, which made victory possible. Redford certainly does not ignore the contributions of the Royal Canadian Navy, the United States Navy, or that of smaller allies, but this is the overall conclusion. The story of the British Pacific Fleet, the largest British fleet ever assembled, is presented, but it was a very junior partner to the immense United States fleets operating in that Ocean in 1945. The final epilogue brings us back to the opening query about this history – ‘The Royal Navy and sea power won the war by allowing a small island to exploit the use of the sea’. While this was undoubtedly true in so far as it was a necessary precondition to victory (as it was experienced), it was not sufficient in itself. Much more had to follow from this sea power in Western Europe and the Mediterranean for Germany and Italy to collapse in the west. More still had to be achieved for which the Royal Navy’s contribution was more tenuous, particularly in relation to Russia and the Pacific. To acknowledge it, or better still, specifically to have addressed the arguments about sea power and the Eastern Front and Far Eastern/Pacific theatres would do much to round out the thesis presented here.

The third volume in this series, *The Napoleonic Wars*, takes us back to the classic period of British naval power. For a generation of naval officers and historians at the end of the nineteenth century, it a golden age of British naval power. At a time of bewildering technological change in firepower, steam propulsion and steel armour, they were trying to comprehend, and make the public understand, how sea power worked. They hoped that from this they would demonstrate its perpetual importance to national security and wealth. The period 1793-1815 seemed to prove the proposition. Like Duncan Redford and Philip Gove, Martin Robson is a master of his material and his argument. The book is well written, clearly argued and well supported by cases, anecdotes and sources. At the core of the argument is that during the wars of 1793-1815, the Royal Navy was the essential defensive and offensive weapon of the British state. Throughout the war, the navy so dominated European waters that it made an invasion extremely difficult if not impossible. The existence of a powerful Channel Squadron imposed such high costs on the French plans for an invasion that they proved cripplingly complex and fragile. The only major attempt, in 1805, collapsed as the necessary co-ordination of French squadrons and flotillas failed. The catastrophic defeat at Trafalgar was a consequence of this failure, after thereafter there were no serious invasion attempts.

The Royal Navy was also essential to the achievement of Britain’s subsidiary war aims. It could not prevent the Low Countries falling into French hands by 1796, but it did, by Admiral Duncan’s victory at Camperdown in October 1797, prevent a large part of the Dutch navy from ever being united with the naval power of France. The capture of eight more Dutch ships at the Texel in August 1799 eliminated any significant threat from the Low Countries. The navy could not prevent the Russians or Danes from succumbing to French pressures in 1800 aimed at closing the Baltic to British trade, nor could it prevent Napoleon from applying the same pressure in 1807, but in both cases, the Royal Navy did ensure that the Baltic remained open to British shipping by the attacks on Copenhagen in 1801 and 1807. Similarly it could not prevent Russia from making peace with France in 1807, but by maintaining a discrete presence in the Baltic it continued to protect the vital shipping routes from Russian or Swedish interference until 1812 when the wider diplomatic circumstances of the region turned in Britain’s favour. The navy could not prevent Spain, Italy and the Dalmatian coast falling under French control, but beginning in 1798 and culminating in 1805, the Royal Navy attained a sustainable domination of the Mediterranean, controlling the trade routes and preventing further French adventures to the Middle East.

The Royal Navy was the offensive weapon that secured ‘the global maritime economic system’ and provided Britain with the strategic flexibility to take advantage of any French weakness throughout the world. By protecting British trading interests and twice systematically destroying those of her enemies, the Royal Navy deprived the France of trade, fiscal surpluses, and economic resources that might, in the long term, have reconciled the French people and, particularly, the conquered nations of Europe, to the Napoleonic Empire. The conquests provided Britain with trade surpluses, secure markets, fiscal stability, and diplomatic

leverage through re-exports and subsidies. As it was, Europeans added economic deprivation to their religious and national frustrations as reasons for detesting French occupation or domination. The British were well equipped to stoke this discontent with everything from exports to military expeditions. They could continue almost indefinitely until the French Empire began to crumble under internal and diplomatic pressures.

Robson's narrative is the story of how this was achieved at a tactical and strategic level. The work is neatly divided into two – the period before 1805 which is characterised as the struggle for sea control and the period after the Trafalgar campaign, which Robson describes as the period of exploitation of sea domination. It is a distinction that works better than alternative divisions based around the Peace of Amiens in 1802 or the coronation of Napoleon in December 1804. The emphasis is, unsurprisingly, on the first period, in which the battles and the expeditions are more dramatic and frequent. The initial campaigns in home waters revealed how weak the French navy was in the wake of the desertion of much of its noble officer corps. Both in defence and offence, the Royal Navy exhibited an unmatched aggressive determination to weaken the enemy. The attrition inflicted on the French navy during 1794-5 rapidly reduced its fighting capability. Frigate squadrons harassed the French coasts and the shift from open blockade to close blockade of French ports in the later 1790s, increasingly limited French naval action. The famous battles that confirmed British control of the seas, the Glorious First of June (1794), Cape St Vincent (1797), Camperdown (1797), the Nile (1798), Copenhagen (1801) and Trafalgar (1805) are all presented as the usual markers of growing British domination of the seas.

Robson explains how this naval power was exploited and consolidated by expeditionary forces sent to the French coast, the Low Countries, the West Indies and the Mediterranean. These had very mixed results, but Robson is able to show that by the Peace of Amiens, Britain had secured much of the French and Dutch colonial empires, dramatically reduced the naval power of her enemies, expanded her own naval power, reinforced her position in the Mediterranean and seen significant growth in her maritime commerce. British war aims had not been fully achieved and the threat of invasion not entirely removed, but naval power had secured the advantages Britain possessed at this point.

The Trafalgar campaign is well covered, with over twenty pages devoted to the battle itself. After the battle, which had not saved Britain from invasion, but had crippled Napoleon's naval power, Britain had to ensure that the Emperor did not recreate his battle fleets, and, at the same time, turn towards exploiting her own maritime force. Ruthless operations against Denmark in 1807 secured the Danish fleet for Britain. Other attempts to destroy French naval capability, at Aix Roads in 1809, Walcheren in 1809 and Bergen-op-Zoom in 1814 were less successful, but Napoleon was never able bring together a battle fleet that could challenge the domination of the Royal Navy.

The rest of the book presents the operations that consolidated and exploited this sea control. The campaigns are by geographical area – Home Waters/Baltic, Mediterranean, and the wider world. They incorporate the role of the Royal Navy in supporting the Peninsula war (1807-1814), campaigns in the West Indies, South Atlantic, East Indies and North America (from 1812). It ends with Exmouth's bombardment of Algiers in 1816 – a climactic, though relatively costly, expression of naval power and its political force. The narratives are clear and well balanced by maps, graphs and illustrations. The text is supported by a good blend of primary and secondary references.

As a single volume history of the war at sea between 1793 and 1815 this work can be highly recommended. Like its companion volumes it presents the history of the war from the perspective the naval power. As this is often missing, particularly for the conflicts of the twentieth century, it is an important corrective. This is less a problem for the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which is a conflict whose naval dimension is so strongly represented in British art and literature. For this reason, the lack of a section on the overall context of wars is unfortunate. It is possible to leave this history without understanding how naval power fitted into European diplomacy across the whole period. Naval power provided the means for Britain to subsidise allies, but it did not generate the reasons for the allies to demand those subsidies. Subsidies tended to follow

diplomacy rather than lead it, except in the very last stages of the Napoleonic War when peace rather than war was being decided. Throughout the wars British diplomatic successes were the result of balancing a complex set of variables, of which naval power was usually one, but often not decisive in itself. Robson is right that Britain emerged from the wars with an unrivalled naval power and a balance of war entirely in its favour. Redford and Grove are also right to emphasise the centrality of naval power in Britain's history in the twentieth century. However, not to acknowledge that this naval power existed within broader diplomatic and military considerations is to miss part of the picture.

This series has begun with three authors who know their material, write well and construct persuasive arguments. They make solid first contributions what the series editor intends to be, 'the most comprehensive and readable history of the Royal Navy'. The books are well produced, generously illustrated and attractive volumes. They are welcome as an important balance to military and diplomatic histories that have ignored the sea and naval power, or which have not kept up to date with the great flowering of naval history that has taken place in the last forty years. Each of these volumes, capitalising on this new research, goes far beyond being just another institutional history of the Royal Navy. They are about how the Royal Navy exercised sea power and what this meant to Britain during the periods under discussion. However, there remains the danger that unless this idea of sea power is embedded into the broader fabric of British social and diplomatic concerns, the message with the authors wish to convey – that sea power was and is of primary importance to the British state – will be overshadowed by the Royal Navy as a tradition and an institution.

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