

Naval Power and British Culture, 1760–1850: Public Trust and Government Ideology

Review Number: 421

Publish date: Monday, 1 November, 2004

Author: Roger Morriss

ISBN: 754630315X

Date of Publication: 2004

Price: £49.50

Pages: 312pp.

Publisher: Ashgate

Place of Publication: Aldershot

Reviewer: Barry Gough

In one of his most irritated moods, Samuel Pepys, sometime naval administrator, recorded in his diary that he and his office had just had the experience of being judged by investigators who were entirely unaware of the nature of the business of running a department of the navy. Pepys's experience is rather common. Distinguished administrators quite used to running their own establishments with avuncular control, and even benign detachment, often find that politics have intervened – and, before long, their line of office is terminated, or they resign rather than face the new regime and its foreign demands. But one scheme of administration gives way to another – and perhaps another still – and one wonders if progress is ever advanced or achieved. The more things change the more they seem the same, and the cult of progress is often self-serving and hardly liable to do things better with less. I had some experience of this myself, when once in charge of an advisory commission on academic restructuring at a distinguished university; though the measures proposed as reforms were only advisory, half the faculty or more, who feared most for the sanctity of their bailiwicks, thought I had become either a grand invigilator or perhaps even a czar. The point is that change agents such as hitherto little known Samuel Bentham, brother of Jeremy Bentham, the writer on jurisprudence and founder of Benthamism, a new mode of political economy, made a great number of people nervous. The essential political culture of naval administration and practice was changed in consequence of Samuel Bentham's concepts and strictures, and it is hard to gauge whether these were effected on the grounds of the undeniable wisdom of the reforms that he imagined and proposed, or were brought into existence by the general antique way of doing business under the old system of fees.

The author is Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Exeter, and a member of that distinguished school of maritime and naval history that is having global reach and influence. The Honourable Editor of the Navy Records Society, he is author of numerous articles in *The Mariner's Mirror*. His book *The Royal Dockyards during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Leicester, 1983) marks him out as an historian of great competence. A student of Professor Ian Christie of University College London, he is well versed in the politics and nuances of administrative and political history, with an emphasis on administrative.

The naval administration of these pre-reform days was run on contracts, nepotism and fees. Because the Royal Navy and the industrial infrastructure that made it prominent both in home waters and distant seas

constituted the largest segment of the British industry of the times, the naval administration that held it together was huge – and the biggest branch of government service. Every aspect of wielding the trident of Neptune had to be accomplished by bureaucrats or those in the private sector who did their bidding. The system, too, was wide open to theft and fraud. ‘Thefts, perquisites and inaccessible accounts were a potent mixture. What else was being lost?’ asks Dr Morriss (p. 105). A good question. Pierre Trudeau, Canadian prime minister, when once asked about government corruption, gave the throw-away line that if it became more than ten percent then something would have to be done about it. What Samuel Bentham wanted was a mechanism of control, and he wanted to reassert or establish trust in the public sector. An end would have to come to lining pockets and to sending contracts to friends. How could a person benefiting from these nefarious arrangements take notice of any wrongdoing or be conscious of past events? The system in place worked for the moment no matter how inefficiently; Samuel Bentham wanted something for the present and the future. He wanted accountability and thus durability. Undoubtedly, these were noble concepts. And at the same time that civil service examinations were about to make their appearance, favouritism and nepotism (real or imagined) were to be corrected, even abolished, under new, more transparent means.

The bureaucrats benefited from the fee system (and it is estimated here that about sixty percent of all business was done by bureaucrats on a fee system). Nowadays such a scheme would seem to be fraudulent and certainly open to bribes. In those days it was the way of the world, and who is to say that it would not be more efficient? The public morality however, would not stand it, and Samuel Bentham, who, like his brother, was bound by strong conservative principles, favoured a scheme of individual responsibility, by which was meant that every officer of prominence, and all underlings besides, had responsibility for his own desk, his own remit, so to speak. Sir James Graham, First Lord of the Admiralty, in 1832 (and later) penned a memorandum on his 1832 reforms in which he explained that the whole new administration, his pride and joy, was based on the new principle of individual responsibility. Reading key Admiralty papers on administrative decisions after the year 1832, we can see how this was effected: officers took responsibility for their decisions within their own discrete areas of concern. They managed their own desks. Bribes or incentives – fees, generically – were set aside in favour of the dignity and power of the office. In short, such offers were being elevated above the monetary inducements that office afforded. This, truly, was a remarkable shift in the public culture of the United Kingdom, and the Royal Navy in particular. Although the purchase of commissions still existed in the Army, the Navy operated more strictly on patronage and benefit of personal connection. Merit, more so than money (or purchase), was always the basic denominator in finding a place in the Navy and having further advancement beyond being a Volunteer First Class (and destined for the quarterdeck).

The new ideology of Bentham and its introduction were revolutionary to many, and Dr Morriss classifies them as revolutionary even if he does not use the word. He shows the changes implemented and he shows how some of them were checked. That Samuel Bentham’s ideas swept like wildfire through naval administration is a telling comment on the political support for change in the years before, during and after Waterloo, and we are left wondering if indeed all the credence that had been given to the Melvilles and the Middletons of earlier years – that change is directed from the top where it can be most effectively implemented – is true after all.

Many who read this will have spent hours reading, say, War Office or Admiralty or Foreign Office files in The National Archives, and will know that the administrators of the day kept long hours. Like their cabinet superiors, to whom they were answerable, they put in double days, almost, in order to keep ahead of the paperwork. Many found it preferable to do the work themselves, even if the hours seemed interminable and exhausting. But they were taking care of their duties, and doing it more responsibly than farming it out to underlings. If that system could be made to trickle down, a greater efficiency could be made on a vertical, and even lateral, basis. But what Samuel Bentham also proposed was internal audit, or external audit, and, in this regard (he had been named Inspector General), the investigatory powers of the office brought a new form of culture to bureaucracy. Harry Truman, later President of the United States, learned all about US Army contracts when he headed a congressional office examining army contracts. When you think about it, who can know more about a system than an auditor, especially one with a forensic streak? The irony is that,

despite auditor generals in, say, Canada, or congressional committee heads such as Truman, or inspectors general such as Bentham, new abuses are likely to take hold. Deviance knows no bounds within governments. But Dr Morriss is abundantly correct in this well researched book that public trust and government ideology shifted dramatically in the time under consideration. So much has been made of the creation of the English state during the Tudors, and it safe to say that that more accountable measures that were brought in during the near century commencing in 1750 transformed naval administration and British public administration in a larger sense.

One of the hard-to-shake burdens of British naval history, and historiography, has been the perceived (and not wholly correct) division of naval history from national (or for that matter imperial) history. Until Arthur Marder's *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow* (5 vols., 1961–1971), naval history tended to be a separate branch of history, divorced from the larger currents of history. Some would say that this was because of the Service's unique tasks. Other would say that it relates to the essential conservatism of marine cultures and the Royal Navy's officer class in particular. Still others would claim that because the Royal Navy was the servant of the state, a branch of government, it ought to be treated as an arm rather than a body proper. Even others would say that, before Marder, most naval history was written by persons attached to the Senior Service. But what Dr Morris has done is to bring the naval story back into the centre, and to see the political changes of the times as acted out through naval administration as part of the seismic shift of the government and civil administration into the modern world. In all this is a gifted thesis, nicely argued and thoroughly researched. The work is based on a full and recent appreciation of the abundant secondary literature of the past two decades. It also reflects considerable research in public and private collections. British culture saw the shifts in administrative practices that were introduced in consequence of Samuel Bentham's guiding principles. The increased efficiencies of the dockyards and contracts systems had relevance to society more generally. He, like his brother Jeremy, was a futurist. Samuel Bentham produced a scheme that had a unifying influence in naval departments. 'It was a scheme that had the merit of contributing directly to government thinking, engendering greater trust and control both within Britain and its empire' (p. 265).

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/421>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/2086>