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Studying Naval History in the 21st Century Matters: Royal Navy Edition

Author: James W.E. Smith

Kings College London, Department of War Studies, Laughton Unit,
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In the 21st century we are questioning, debating, and even arguing over every aspect of the Royal Navy's past or future. In the United Kingdom maritime strategy, once the proven staple of British defence has been relegated to the side-lines. Meanwhile in the United States naval thinkers are a ball of anxious and nervous contention constantly looking over their shoulders wondering if what they are doing or planning is the correct course of action. Considering the generations of today, unformed or otherwise have unparalleled access to the wisdom, knowledge and experiences of their forebears why do we find ourselves, on both sides of Atlantic more trusting of naval thinking in the past than today?

Many thinkers across a range of academic and intellectual fields would accept the challenge of this question, using the modern obsession to claim we now face more complex situations. They would remind us that modern warfare is more sophisticated than ever before. This hyperbole distracts from the fact many challenges we face are similar to, or even less than previous generations repetitively faced. Historians would argue that this approach is a distraction from the doubts and fear of potential mistakes, unknowns or wildly random ideas that we may have written, taught and accepted into our military thinking because we devalued the study of history itself. This is because naval history is both a process and record that sets the baseline for all aspects of the naval service to allow it advance while providing running commentary on its progress. If used wisely, this vast collection of experiences, actions, and their results can empower Navy's to avoid perils and pitfalls of the past while enabling them to be sufficiently bold to plan for today and tomorrow. To understand the value of studying history is to firstly understand that the experiences of the past are a vast repository of wisdom that the modern sailor or naval thinker can immerse themselves in to gain insights and perspectives on both the process and the possible solutions that have been used before. Neither technical change nor inter-service and political challenges provide reason to ignore this potent tool because the past remains the only real experience available to the sailor of today. Secondly as British naval historian Julian Corbett critically highlighted the forum of intellectual discussion and the study of history acts as a vehicle to further strategic objectives and act as a persistent, often nagging stick to push and prod the naval service forward.

Historians are guided by this tested approach, leading them to query why, now that the vast repository of wisdom that is the past is now more accessible than ever before, still questions and doubt exist over our capability for thinking-fighting maritime strategy and naval policy in the modern era. In some quarters and especially among historians some wonder if Western states are still equipped to create robust, efficient, and effective maritime strategy. This is an exceptionally difficult proposition to accept considering the Royal Navy has taken a leading role in creating that record and deploying it to develop naval theory while being one of the world's most successful

fighting forces. The simple answer is that the system of studying and educating through history was removed from their intellectual arsenal. This is a problematic for the service and British thinkers who created the field of naval history and laid the foundations of maritime strategy that remain the staple of naval thinking around the world today. This leadership would go on to shape new historians and strategists including American Alfred Mahan who elegantly summed up their work in 1911; “The study of military history lies at the foundation of all sound military conclusions and practices.”

John Laughton’s leadership of the naval intellectual revolution that started in the 19th century focused on creating the field of naval history and operationalising the study of history and role of historians to develop doctrine for the Royal Navy. It was certainly not luck that at the height of naval intellectual development in the first half of the 20th century, naval intelligence, historical research, and the Admiralty board room shared a common ethos based on theory and practice. If the heart of the Royal Navy was in its personnel, its brain was the concert of the intellectual discussion around the forum of intelligence, history and decision-making. Corbett’s caution about learning lessons was constrained to tactics and service doctrine in which he realised would need to change as technologies shaped warfare and discarding irrelevant material if appropriate. The benchmark for being forward looking was identified when not long after Corbett had published ‘Some Principles of Maritime Strategy’ in 1911, that he recognised that it needed updating. This was not just because of how warfare can so easily evolve, but the intellectual enlightenment that professional historical methodologies had enabled him to recognise how naval warfare can and had changed and that theory would need to respond to it. Meanwhile the more critical and easily translatable message of Laughton, Corbett and Mahan’s methodology is that to gain confidence in our thinking to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow we need to understand the processes of strategic decision making in the past.

The work of this intellectual forum in the decades between 1890 and 1914 gave history influence what would become an important element in the success of the Royal Navy and the United States Navy through many 20th century challenges. By embedding the study of history in debates and decision making the Royal Navy provided the platform to elevate the service to an unprecedented success yet seasoned with just enough failure to avoid complacency. Mahan and Corbett may have become well known names in military circles but they, in conjunction with Laughton struggled against collective and wilful neglect, if not pure ignorance of the naval past in their eras. Yet success and technological change post 1945 saw both the UK and US become complacent about their maritime defences with the convoluted naval narrative focused on the drama of events. The post 1945 move away from a historical base paralleled the trends of the previous century. It was to combat such present-minded, technological led thinking that Laughton, Mahan and Corbett created the classic text of naval history. It was a history for navies, not a mere chronology of events to edify the public or midshipman. It serves as a pertinent and timely reminder to keep investing both effort, time and education to the thinking machinery of the naval service. Yet restoring confidence in our naval thinking today is a challenge for both nations, the Royal Navy’s situation is far grimmer. Maritime strategy and history has become a sentimental past time and the service disconnected from its heritage and finding itself pandering to every whim of the other services. It is the pertinent example of the disaster of removing the study of history from the defence machinery of a nation and how easy it is to fall from having leading edge intellectual prowess that should be promulgating through an coherent national strategy as Corbett

achieved in 1911. Even if Britain cannot be the leading naval power by strength, a question of resource, it should retain its intellectual mastery of maritime strategy because it is still a major maritime power, dependent on oceanic commerce for vital supplies of food and fuel, security and its prosperity. Britain's relationship with Europe and the wider world makes Britain even more maritime. It should send the nation back to experience of acting alone in a uncertain world.

To understand how the Royal Navy got into its grim position is to reflect over the state of post-Second World War naval affairs. British historians recognise that post-1945 mistakes have been made within the field. The ejection of naval history from the modern defence ministry machinery and the embracement of other disciplines may have been the cause of some of today's issues. In the UK, its navy and historians were being challenged by the dogmatic pupils of delusional air power theorist Lord Trenchard, who encouraged all out service rivalry over maritime strategy via what was known in 1917 as the 'Smuts report' and it led the way to the creation of the Royal Air Force in 1918. In the 1950s Air Marshal Slessor had picked up the baton and used the popular opinion of the air force to renew attacks on the naval service. At the same time, the Royal Navy was facing accusations of the irrelevance of their apparently 'older methods,' such as those proposed by Corbett, who were deemed as outdated and not suited for modern times. The Royal Navy was not only facing the crisis of a self-absorbed and opportunist Earl Mountbatten and Britain's growing economic issues but also that naval historians had abandoned Laughton's first principal of naval history; to work on subjects of interest to the contemporary Navy while employing the rigor of academia. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defence was purging many of the fundamental coherences and administrative traditions that were vital to develop Royal Navy doctrine, which included the role of historians. British historians in the following decades would retreat to what would seem the archetypal stereotype of a historian; a predilection of small issues and debating the greatest of irrelevancies with little public or governmental interaction. Rightfully some historians built the museums of today, educate the public and shine a light on the bravery and sacrifice of past generations. However, the thinking-fighting-theorist style of historian, akin to Corbett and Laughton seemingly vanished while the Royal Navy would go through what was essentially the terror of the decades of post-Admiralty 1960s British defence policy. The targeted elimination of the British Admiralty contributed to the fundamental disconnect in the role of the historian to the creation of theory and the dismantling of Britain's intellectual naval prowess. Without a naval voice at the highest level, in defence or politics there was no chance that history would gain a hearing. Studying post 1945 history would continue to be overlooked by many, even the historical profession holding it in near contempt. Many ignoring that humans remember and bond more with living memory or a few recent generations than that of an age that increasingly slips further behind the modern day. This attitude demonstrating ignorance to Laughton's advice of how the military and public must be kept engaged requires historians to stay in step, after all the equipment and events of the latter 20th century resembles and resonates with today's military and political life more so than for example the 'Age of Sail'.

It is no coincidence that as historians have been removed from the intellectual forum of defence that the development of naval theory and the use of maritime strategy has weakened. The fact that historians are no longer influencing the Navy and wider defence debates has propelled us into these 21st-century doubts and adversely pushed Britain away from having maritime strategy. While in the United States historians have founded it increasingly difficult and challenge to find a consistent path for historians to have a voice at the highest levels. In both nations, policy through

to doctrine, tactics and other aspects of defence, intelligence and foreign involvement has become largely reactive to events. Today's 'system' of defence education and debate effectively ignores Corbett or Mahan's approach to the way navies should do business. The older 'system' protected British defence to far greater extent than today's from hackneyed institutionalised mantras and rigid unfounded concepts. The Royal Navy having been duped, disarmed and demoralised into pandering to every whim of the joint services and the politico-fiscal orientated ministry, it is now so far situated from having its own forum that it once had, and this has resulted in a class of naval officers far less likely to think innovatively and independently than their predecessors. Considering the severely reduced state of the Royal Navy today and the challenges that Britain faces, it may very well be that it lacks the processes and team of people required to think their way through the ever-growing list of defence problems. The vital necessity of thinking politically astute naval officers and civilian thinkers, developed by centuries of a continually refined educated-intellectual forum maybe conscribed to the past, and yet the fate of the Royal Navy and the breaking of the continued suppression of British naval thinking may very well rest upon it.

British naval historians missed the opportunity post war to respond to other influences, disciplines, and fields entering British naval thinking in the post-war era. The greatest advert to the politician and decision maker of why studying naval history is important is to communicate that those who choose to focus more on naval theory, as Mahan and Corbett did, are by default futurists. Corbett having gained insight through sustained reflection of the past produced timely and potent perspectives for both his own time and decision makers facing similar problems in different times. Reflecting on the modern era, we can see an example of how historians of another era were studying the past but have some timely remarks as valid for them then as they are today. Laughton and later Corbett were concerned of how and where a Navy would develop its theory when it went without war fighting it had been designed for or when it quickly had to adapt to an operational tempo that resulted in it forgoing other commitments, challenges, and training. They feared excessive terminology, overbearing kneejerk doctrine and the parachuting of names and heroes to justify some abstract concept. Laughton feared a service where operational tempo or a lack of war fighting broke the ability to reflect, reform and train while critically thinking. All at the same time the Navy in a period of high intensity or lack of challenge had to maintain a continual sense of self-identity and self-promotion while maintaining an intellectual community. They understood that for navies, victory was all the harder to earn because of the risk of disaster from complacency. To understand naval theory is to understand that it is a continually self-reflecting but forward evolving process. To move forward, we must look back, to enable us to have the skill to meet whatever demands and challenges we face tomorrow. To study naval history was to avoid complacency and support naval evolution, because without doing so was to risk that some other player on the seas would out think you, jeopardising command of the seas and the ability to influence land, air and space. If we choose in our era to place value on training and education while keeping the discipline of the study of history close to our core 'naval thinking machinery' then the ability to deliver a successful fighting force, itself a hybrid of thinking and fighting sailor, can become a reality. But if we do choose, then we should be aware that in the West our way of business seems that we choose, learn and then relearn something, a depressing reality that the Royal Navy battles with daily across all its activities.

In Britain post 1964 the nation became blissfully ignorant to that the successful strategies of the past were developed and rooted in the study of the past. To continue the legacy of success and

keep the British Isles, its interests, and territories secure while supporting our allies in maintaining the peace we must study history without the misguided fear that we embrace all of the pasts wrongs by doing so.

It would take at least until 2001 for the British to start to consider talking about naval history as a tool for military thinking again. In the spirit of the virtuous relationship between theorists such as Corbett and Mahan, in April 2017 at the U.S. Naval War College, British and American historians met to discuss the regeneration of the depleted machinery and processes for the sustained effort and creation of naval theory. In the May of 1917 British Admiral Jellicoe, victor of the Battle of Jutland, welcomed Admiral William Sims US Navy to Britain stating that there was no navy in the world that can possibly give Britain more valuable assistance. A century on it could quite possibly be that maintaining world peace would be significantly enhanced by rebuilding British naval thinking and the strength of America's Navy.

James W.E. Smith is a PhD researcher at the Laughton Naval Unit, Department of War Studies, Kings College London. He is also an associate member of Kings College London's Centre for Grand Strategy and Kings Contemporary British History research group.
