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CHAPTER I

THE ATLANTIC

War at sea is still far from being the most important part of a nation's history; but it has had a considerable determining influence on Britain's development and its prosecution has provided a test of national quality. Yet sea power is a condition which is not in evidence except in time of war. Spectacular battles lighten for brief moments the darkness which by its nature shrouds naval strategy; they are dramatic and sometimes crucial in their importance, but judged over a long span of years they may appear among the lesser incidents of a gigantic struggle.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sea power was probably most influential when it was least conspicuous. Even in time of peace it functioned as a powerful instrument of diplomatic action and compulsion. The unrestricted mobility of ships, the ease with which they could be moved, often in secrecy, from one rendezvous to another, and the far-reaching effects which the mere threat of intervention could induce—even to the point of dissolving hostile coalitions before they had properly crystallized—have more than once demonstrated the disproportionate impact of naval supremacy on events far inland.[1] By the action of warships national security was lost or maintained, colonial empires expanded or dissolved, and the seaborne trade of belligerents or neutrals was accelerated or stopped.

[1] See Herbert Rosinski, 'Mahan and the Present War', *Brassey's Naval Annual* (London, 1941), pp. 3–7.

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Yet, the objects and influence of naval strategy cannot always be deduced from the decisions and actions of admirals and captains; national policies based on the use of sea power cannot be inferred from the movements of warships alone. To appreciate the full influence of sea power on the development of the British empire naval history has to be studied from Cabinet offices in Whitehall as well as from the quarter deck. Naval history is a necessary ingredient of political and diplomatic history, and in practice foreign policy and naval strategy are one. Governments have to run wars 'complete'; and in consequence students of naval history must, at the very least, look for a ministerial policy if they are to understand and adequately interpret the preparation for and conduct of war at sea.

This comprehensive approach to the subject is, on the whole, a comparatively recent development. Until the early years of this century naval history was separated from the main stream of history. One explanation of the curious isolation, it has been suggested, was the difficulty of securing access to high-level political and diplomatic discussions and decisions. As a result, the small coterie of specialists dubbed 'naval historians' had to depend on certain exclusive sources such as official proceedings of admirals at sea. Although this defence of naval history in a vacuum is plausible, it is only partly valid. Materials were available in abundance, but the 'naval historian' confined his researches to salt water narrative, because that was the segment of war that interested him, and in which not infrequently he was professionally expert.[1]

[1] In company no doubt with many others I would maintain that novels like Captain Marryat's *Peter Simple* provide as true and authoritative pictures of life at sea in war or peace as any historian can provide.

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I would emphasize that his contribution was a considerable one; but wash out the causes of war, the financing of war, the diplomatic relationships with allies or incipient allies, and the movements and operations of armies, and you are left with naval history as formerly written. The student of sea power was 'in irons'.

At the same time, as though to offset the limitations of a professional compartment, this quarantining of naval history was accompanied by a flow of philosophical deductions on the meaning of 'Command of the Sea', a 'Fleet in Being' and such tags as 'he that hath command of the sea can take as much of the war as he listeth' or 'he that is master of the sea may be said in some sort to be master of every country'. (Over the years I have used most of them myself.) Many of such philosophical interpretations, in the hands of great men like Corbett, Mahan and Richmond, were useful, but they have had an unfortunate tendency over the past seventy-five years to repeat themselves—or to revolve in rhetorical circles, like Mynheer with the steam-leg, who could never stop himself, and was seen whirling along with astonishing velocity even after he had become a skeleton.

Not that I underestimate the historical importance of 'command of the sea'; it deserves to be rubbed into British history. Without it there would have been no British empire; without it Britain would have had grave difficulty in securing allies and maintaining domestic security—and the one time she had no allies she lost America; without it Britons would have been perpetually confined to these Islands, and I might not have been born a Canadian! Indeed, it was a member of my own college in London who was responsible for first introducing the serious study of naval records, and inter-

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preting them in terms of the influence of naval supremacy on national history. In 1874 John Knox Laughton, who held the Chair of Modern History at King's College between 1885 and 1912, read a paper at the Royal United Service Institution on 'The Scientific Study of Naval History'. This paper was printed in the *Journal* of that Institution, where some time later it was read by an American captain called Alfred Thayer Mahan, who according to his own admission had not hitherto thought much about history.

Laughton's paper had an explosive effect on Mahan's thinking, and the repercussions, it is fair to say, were felt by the whole world. Mahan plunged deeply into the study of history; his authorities were limited as compared with today, and in some instances unreliable, and the wonder is that he built so well on foundations so inadequate. But the ultimate result was the appearance in 1891 of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*. No one would suggest that Captain Mahan either discovered, or ever claimed to have discovered, the doctrine of sea power; his own works show how well it was understood by the elder Pitt, and by certain members of the Admiralty during the Napoleonic wars. During the nineteenth century, however, an understanding of the meaning of 'command of the sea' was the privilege of the very few statesmen and seamen who survived those wars; and when they died there were no historians to carry the lessons forward. Probably the greatest historian so far produced by North America is Francis Parkman; yet you have only to compare his two volumes *Montcalm and Wolfe* with Julian Corbett's *England in the Seven Years' War* to recognize that the former was written before, and the latter after Mahan had written *The Influence of Sea Power on History*.

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But this was no 'conceptual' history, no unsustained theoretical formulation, no parade of ideas unaccompanied by marshalled evidence. Much of the strength of the narrative lies in flat statements which the author attempted to justify on the basis of experience and cogent analysis. Trained in the age of sail, and possessing technical mastery of the tactics of battle and the strategy of naval warfare, he rediscovered and reinterpreted the great traditions of the sailing ship era. On the evidence of a far-flung miscellany of sources, he developed the doctrine of 'command of the sea' and the strategic consequences that followed from it—the effects of 'command' upon land warfare, on the history of west European expansion and on the acquisition and retention of empires. On the basis of centuries of history, he formulated doctrines that were grasped and recklessly applied by Wilhelm II of Germany. I recall Sir Charles Webster's extemporaneous remark in the course of a lecture many years ago: 'Mahan was one of the causes of World War I.'

As a great historical synthesis *The Influence of Sea Power* was a masterpiece, and it remains a classic, but in terms of scholarship it was undoubtedly premature.[1] Because Mahan tended to concentrate on strategy divorced from politics and diplomacy he unwittingly encouraged the quarantining of naval history from the main stream of knowledge. On the other hand, if, as a serving officer, he had managed to find the time to soak himself in the available British documents—the Admiralty IN and OUT letters, Admiralty Instructions, the miscellaneous minutes—do no more than sample the Captains' Logs which represent the diaries of every ship in

[1] See Julian Corbett, 'The Revival of Naval History', being the Laughton Memorial Lecture delivered at King's College, London, on 4 October 1916.

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commission, and had then delved into the political, economic and diplomatic background of his period, he might well have written only one book; indeed he could hardly have finished *The Influence of Sea Power* on such a scale, and we might have lost the authority and perspective which his peculiar genius for generalization brought to bear on broad strategical problems.

To bring naval history back within the main stream of history required time and toil as well as broad learning. Laughton himself prepared the way when he founded the Navy Records Society for the systematic collection and interpretation of relevant documents. The present series—105 volumes up to date—show the interconnection between politics, commerce, finance and naval strategy, and demonstrate conclusively the senselessness of trying to isolate one kind of knowledge in a compartment. But it is a far call from a hundred or so printed volumes of documents and an acre of Foreign and Colonial Office papers, to a new integration of naval and British history; and there is an abysmal gulf between saying what should be done, and the doing of it. The easiest, and not the least impressive inaugural lecture is the kind that describes with scholarly acumen what the other fellow should do.

Although fully aware of the weakness of this cowardly approach, I am tempted to point out that while problems of naval strategy demand relevant knowledge of foreign policy, naval projects and operations badly need investigation from a united service point of view—in relation to the land as well as the sea. One must not push the national importance of sea power too far; it would be an historical error to attempt to shove heroes like Clive or Wolfe, Marlborough or Wellington

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too far into the shade of the admirals. British governments have rarely been unaware of the need for a strong naval force. They have been more often guilty of neglecting to maintain an army capable of providing a home defence force, and, even more important, a field force for European or overseas operations, or for what I like to call Foreign Office or Colonial Office wars.

In the great wars of the eighteenth century and even in the twentieth, Britain was usually supported by allies on the European continent; these allies wanted primarily front-line troops because they were concerned with the elimination of the enemy as an active opponent *on land*. To put the army in Europe, or overseas, naturally required command of the sea, and occasionally the struggle between whale and elephant produced an equilibrium that could only be broken on land. Nelson's decisive battles of the Nile and Trafalgar, which led to the downfall of French sea power, were followed by Napoleon's destruction of the continental armies at Austerlitz, Jena and Wagram. The Battle of the Nations near Leipzig in October 1813 was the decisive battle for the liberation and reclamation of Europe.[1] Final possession of European territory was the consequence of victory on land—the demolition of Napoleon's army.

It is well to remember too that as long as an enemy could win victories on land, in Europe or overseas, he could always enter the market of peace negotiations with valuable bargaining counters. What was lost by defeat at sea might be retrieved at the peace table. During the Seven Years War in

[1] The Nile was fought on 1 August 1798; Trafalgar on 21 October 1805; Austerlitz on 2 December 1805; Jena on 14 October 1806; Wagram on 5–6 July 1809; Leipzig on 16–19 October 1813. A special medal was struck for Waterloo, but not for Trafalgar.

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India, the French held local mastery of the sea for a considerable time, but were beaten on land; and with the defeat of their army they lost the struggle in India, because their victories at sea gave them no bargaining advantages at the peace. British ministers were very much aware of this constant factor in peace negotiations; it was not only the needs of home security that prompted Britain to support costly expeditionary forces and prickly allies; they had to do it to make sure of winning the war, and for that purpose an effective army was essential.

In short, warfare has been and remains ultimately based on land, and primarily directed against an enemy's land forces. At sea there is no defined territory which a naval squadron can occupy, and on which its commanders can assert an enduring authority. The sea is a passive, unlimited, empty medium except to the fisherman. To the trader, it provides only a route, and in essence, command of the sea means little more than the control of shipping passing along such routes. 'The importance which attaches to the command of the sea', read an Admiralty memorandum of 1902, 'lies in the control which it gives over sea communications. The weaker sea-power is absolutely unable to carry to success any large military expedition over sea....'[1] In other words, naval warfare is concerned with the maintenance of maritime communications through the destruction of the enemy's power

[1] Memorandum on Imperial Defence presented to the Colonial Conference of 1902 (A. Berriedale Keith (ed.), *Selected Speeches and Documents on British Colonial Policy, 1763–1917* (Oxford, 1933), II, 230). 'Keeping of the sea routes inviolate' became an Admiralty dogma of the nineteenth century. In the opinion of Lt.-Cmdr. D. W. Waters, R.N., such an emphasis on communications, by encouraging a strategy of blockade and patrol, led to a neglect of shipping *per se*, and was responsible for the disastrous Admiralty failure to organize a convoy system at the beginning of World War I.

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to break them, and not, as in land warfare, with the conquest of territory.[1] By winning control of the main traffic lines, not only was the superior navy in a position to exert pressure on the enemy shore; it could and did prevent that enemy from using the bulk of his shipping for his own commercial or military benefit. Success in this endeavour did not necessarily mean the end of the conflict, but it contributed to the ultimate strategic objective: the complete reduction of the enemy's strength.

Thanks to the immunity from interference provided by this control a small country like Britain could exercise a world weight far beyond her resources in manpower and wealth. With superior strength at sea she could obtain swift and far-reaching results by isolated victories. However indeterminate its effects on the balance of power on the Continent, sea power was likely to be decisive in its results overseas, where the territories in question were dependent for sustenance on the mother country in Europe. As the long maritime struggle with France revealed, the inferior contender was incapable of safeguarding distant colonies. Because of its indivisibility—'the sea is one' was an old Admiralty maxim—the control of the oceans was bound to go to the superior belligerent, who by cutting his opponent's communications could mop up his colonies at leisure.

In this manner, Britain was able, in the course of three centuries, to win a major share of the non-European spoils that Columbus and Vasco da Gama had first glimpsed from their decks. During this time she was able to eliminate in

[1] Corbett, *Principles*, pp. 80–1. In this connection, see Friedrich Ratzel, *Das Meer als Quelle der Völkergrösse, Eine Politisch-Geographische Studie* (Munich and Berlin, 2nd ed. 1911), especially pp. 73–81.

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succession her Spanish, Dutch and French rivals for empire; and not until she collided with self-sufficient colonies during the War of American Independence did this almost uninterrupted career of maritime expansion come temporarily to a stop. With its revival during the War of the French Revolution, the almost automatic process of acquisition began again. By 1815 an overseas empire, whose original focus had been the North Atlantic, almost encircled the world—from Canada and the Caribbean in the west around the Cape of Good Hope to India and Australia, and, by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, eastward to the islands of the Pacific. With the 'inevitability of gradualness' the geography of the sea had shaped Britain's destiny. Command of the sea meant a practical monopoly of communications throughout the oceans of the world, including most of the great gateways—the Straits of Dover and the English Channel, the Strait of Gibraltar, the entrance to the Indian Ocean around the Cape, and even before the occupation of Aden and Singapore, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb and the Straits of Malacca. In the words of Sir Halford Mackinder: 'When the Napoleonic War was over, British sea-power encompassed, almost without competition, that great world-promontory which stands forward to the Cape of Good Hope from between Britain and Japan.'[1]

In the beginning, however, there was little beyond the occasional plundering raid to suggest the coming struggle for empire. For half a century after the first Columbus expedition, no European state seriously opposed the claims of Spain or Portugal as set down in the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494. French and English searches for a north-west passage to the

[1] *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (Pelican edition, London, 1944), p. 49.

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