

## Introduction

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The initial stimulus for this book came from the author's desire to try to find out for himself, as far as it seemed feasible, what was what in the Admiralty, and who did quite what. An incentive here was stumbling over statements in some secondary sources such as 'the Admiralty decided', or even 'the Admiralty thought', which appeared dubious not through any refusal to accept that decisions were being made on naval matters, and certainly not a contemptuous belief that 'naval thinking' was an oxymoron, but rather that it was ludicrous to imply – except as a useful shorthand, to which one must resort on occasion – that the Admiralty constituted some kind of single mind, or – in some ways even worse – that there has been always some identifiable individual within the department who was responsible for everything.

While there has therefore been an attempt in this book to discern where decisions were actually made, and by whom, it also seemed necessary to see how and even why changes occurred over time. Here again, one was in part responding to stimulation; in this case to implications that for the navy nothing essentially changed – that in terms of attitudes, principles and structures, what is valid for the Royal Navy had always been so. For it is clear that naval historians, no less than their colleagues in the rest of the discipline, have to pay attention to Quentin Skinner's warning about the myths of coherence and doctrine.<sup>1</sup> In short, the past did not think as we do, and one should not impute modern ideas to try to explain what happened. Above all, one must try not to simplify the inconsistency of the past, and falsely attribute the kind of rational planning now seen as fundamental to good governance. (Whether it really exists now or not is another question.) One other guide to mention in this context is Lucien Febvre, who pointed out half a century ago that one should pay attention not just to the words which are present in the historical sources, but those that are not – 'les mots

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 6–22.

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qui manquent'<sup>2</sup> – and there we should especially remark not just that *strategy* appears in English only towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars, which point has been made at various times of late, but that *doctrine* and *policy* were for long rarities in naval and military writings. And if the words are missing, it is only fair to conclude that the concepts behind them were also likely to be absent, at least in a clearly recognisable form. Thus, while it is accepted that decisions were made, it seems far less apparent they were regularly based on consistent and conscious principles, rather than on the needs and immediately available resources of the moment. Policy and policy-making did develop but, it is suggested, only slowly, in association with a change in the approach to time, and came in response to a mixture of forces, including not just foreign challenges but also the rather more intimate factors of financial constraint and control.

To begin to tackle such subjects it was decided to survey some 120 years of Admiralty history. The reader will at once understand the need for such a long period, but might well be uncertain quite why these 120 years were chosen in particular. Various answers might be offered. On the one hand, we are able to traverse from Trafalgar to Jutland. Thus we can begin with the battle that set the tone for the British naval mastery that was to come, and see the administrative under-structuring of that great victory. From that we can continue, and see how in the succeeding century that under-structuring was adapted to maintain mastery, as well as could be managed. Then we arrive at the second battle, where a similar stunning victory was expected by many Britons, yet did not come: instead there was what superficially was at best a drawn engagement, setting the scene for what in the 1920s was a sharing of mastery, succeeded in the Second World War by a passing of the trident, despite efforts by the Royal Navy (and the Dominion forces) in various ways superior to what had been achieved in the First. However, this survey does not reach that handover; we go only to 1927, not 1945. If that means the full story – from the administrative and policy-making point of view – of both supremacy and the passing of supremacy cannot be told, which would have been grossly demanding in a single volume, we can survey supremacy itself, including its relationship with the ministry responsible for its maintenance.

By going to 1927, we go far: that includes the decision in the immediate post-war years to maintain during peacetime a Naval Staff which took account of the main lessons of the naval war from 1914 to 1918.

<sup>2</sup> L. Febvre, *Le problème de l'Incroyance au XVIe Siècle. La Religion de Rabelais* (Paris, 1947), 385–8.

One might suggest that the Admiralty was then divided between the functions of command and administration, which in turn would imply there had been a great circling back to the organisation in place at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which had been divided in that way. The apparent single cycle of change during the chosen period is, however, deceptive, and can serve to disguise what was a more significant long-term development in the structure of the Admiralty administration during the same time. By the 1920s there were indeed two main elements in the naval department, ones that had arisen as a result of long-maturing processes. One was the Naval Staff, and the other a superior civilian organisation under the direction of the Permanent Secretary to the Admiralty. However, their functions cannot easily be separated. They were complementary and interdependent departments, both of which had responsibility for policy. Furthermore, they were to remain the two main elements of the Admiralty right up to the Second World War and beyond. Suitably enlarged, they were to be the mainstay of the Admiralty in the later conflict, and were to perform remarkably well.

However, the continuity with what came after 1927 must not disguise from us what did change, and why it is reasonable to take that year as a point at which to pause. While the underlying principles remained more or less intact, in the late 1920s and early 1930s the basis for British naval power was dreadfully reduced. Normally one thinks of such phrases in terms of the loss of so much industrial capacity in the post-1929 depression, and one should accept that depression in itself as helping to mark a dividing line in the history of the Royal Navy. But there were also some important administrative discontinuities to be seen at about the same time. One of these was some further economies in the Naval Staff in 1928, which cut into the Admiralty's ability to plan ahead. We should also note the spread of decision-making on naval matters beyond the Admiralty, forcing the researcher to take a different approach to any study of British naval policy-making. That spread had been going on for some time, beginning before 1914, but it continued apace after the war. One sign of what was going on was the establishment of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Committee in 1923, where the professional heads of the services met to try to draw up general conclusions about defence planning. But in some ways more significant was the greater involvement of various investigatory and standing interdepartmental committees, going beyond those under the aegis of the longer-established Committee of Imperial Defence. That involvement is to be observed in the 1920s, but gathered pace in the following decade, and by then we also have to take account of greater intervention by the Treasury. Though again it was foreshadowed, it was quite clear in the 1930s that that department

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was attempting to do much more than economise: it wished now not so much to block defence expenditure as to shape it. By now, in one way and another, it was the wider Whitehall that was setting defence priorities, both financial and industrial, and the Admiralty had lost a great deal of the autonomy it had enjoyed even back in the 1920s, let alone before. This prefigured what was to happen on an even larger scale during the Second World War, when so much defence planning was devolved beyond the service ministries, even beyond Whitehall, most notably to Washington.

One can observe a break of another kind at the same time. The year 1927 was the one in which Lord Beatty resigned as First Sea Lord, after an almost unequalled tenure. In his time in office we observe the culmination of yet another line of development. Back in 1805, it had been the minister, the First Lord, Lord Barham, who had dominated the Admiralty. Beatty, however, had exerted the main influence within the Admiralty of his time, both on his own part and through the actions of his acolytes. His influence had also been potent outside the Admiralty's walls, whether in the JCS Committee, or the Cabinet, which he advised directly on naval matters.

That leads us to another ingredient of this volume. Some of Beatty's influence was institutional in origin, as a consequence of his post of Chief of Naval Staff, which itself dated from only 1917, as well as through the institution of the JCS and the way that made him chief professional naval adviser to the Cabinet rather than simply to the First Lord. Yet it was also in part personal, gained through his dashing and successful career during the war, and his formidable abilities with both pen and tongue. His example shows well the importance of studying the personnel at the Admiralty. Here we can quote from T. F. Tout, who wrote this about government administration: 'To understand that machine properly one has to learn something about the men engaged in working that machine.'<sup>3</sup> Under that rubric this volume deals at some length not just with First Lords and their naval advisers, but various of the secretaries and clerks under them, though without wishing to inflate the marginal or, of course, to neglect the structures. Particular attention will be given to the secretaries to the Board of Admiralty, men who were commonly more important for the running of the machine than were the Lords Commissioners themselves. The reader must not be dismayed to find that more space is given to Messrs Croker, Barrow, MacGregor, Forwood, Greene and Murray than to most naval officers.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in R. A. Griffiths, 'Some Public and Private Bureaucracies in England and Wales in the Fifteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1980), 109f.

Some comments should be offered by way of apology. First, not all the separate parts of the Admiralty could be described in detail, nor all of their development followed: this is especially true with the bureaucratic proliferation that came with the twentieth century. Nor could policy be followed in all its twists and turns. It will be understood from the title that the main aim of the book is to show the rise of British naval policy-making. However, it should not be expected that policy itself could be described in full: that would have demanded a far larger and much more diffuse volume. The aim is to show how and why policy came to be made, and made more actively than before. Occasionally, some details will be given of what the policy was, but for the most part the reader in search of that will have to refer to other sources. Furthermore, one should admit that ‘the Admiralty’, as shorthand for the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, ought to be a plural noun. However, convenience in various forms leads one to favour the singular, even if that does undermine the attempt otherwise being made to suggest the multiplicity of decision-making in the department.

One final comment: it should be assumed that documents referred to are at the Public Record Office, Kew, unless there are indications to the contrary.

## 1 Lord Barham's Admiralty: 1805

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### Lord Barham, the Board and the Admiralty Office

Lord Barham's position at the very centre of the 1805 Admiralty is nowhere better suggested than in the tale of what happened when the news of Trafalgar arrived at the Admiralty building in Whitehall on the early morning of 1 November. He was in bed, but William Marsden, the First Secretary, knew he had to be roused. Not only was there much to be done, but Barham had shown great annoyance a few months previously on waking to discover he had been left asleep when some urgent news had arrived. So, as Marsden tells us:

Drawing aside his curtain, with a candle in my hand, I awoke the old peer . . . from a sound slumber; and to the credit of his nerves be it mentioned, that he showed no symptom of alarm or surprise, but calmly asked: 'What news, Mr. M?' We then discussed, in a few words, what was immediately to be done, and I sat up the remainder of the night, with such of the clerks as I could collect, in order to make the necessary communications at an early hour to the King, the Prince of Wales, the Duke of York, the Minister, and other members of the Cabinet, and to the Lord Mayor, who communicates the intelligence to the shipping interest at Lloyd's Coffee-house.<sup>1</sup>

In his memoirs, the Second Secretary, John Barrow, gives a somewhat different impression. He states Barham rarely attended meetings of the Board of Admiralty, attributing this to old age. However, as Barrow admits, 'when any doubtful question arose, one of the Lords or Secretaries took his decision on it in his own room'. Age – he was nearly eighty in 1805 – might well have encouraged him to be more retiring than before, but Barham – or Charles Middleton, his name before ennoblement – had long shown a liking for indirect methods of action and influence, including intrigue,

<sup>1</sup> W. Marsden, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Writings of the late William Marsden . . . Written by himself . . .* (London, 1838), 116f. J. Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, new edn, 2 vols. (London, 1919), I, 200f. R. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory. The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (London, 2005), 528. Tradition states that Barham was not sleeping in the State bedroom, Admiralty House, but in the adjoining boudoir.

or peppering those in power with lengthy memoranda. It also seems that Barham was an example of a type we shall encounter again, the senior naval officer who is accustomed to giving verbal orders on the quarter-deck, but when it came to argument preferred paper. He certainly thought fluent talkers were not men of business. Hence his characteristic form of work: long hours at a desk with his pen. According to one letter to Pitt in 1805, his constant attendance at naval business was required from 9 to 5.<sup>2</sup>

It is the stream of memoranda, minutes and orders that issued from his closet which bespeak his real power as First Lord. They were what co-ordinated the whole naval campaign that convinced Napoleon by the end of August 1805 that invasion was impossible, at least for the present; they also underpinned the shattering victory of Trafalgar on 21 October.<sup>3</sup> They were crucial to naval administration at home, as well. One might be misled by the fact that many of the minutes which issued from Barham were not in his hand, but in that of John Deas Thomson, his private secretary, amanuensis and messenger: nevertheless, the directing mind behind them is evident enough. Even many decisions ostensibly by the Board of Admiralty can be laid at the door of the First Lord alone. In theory, the power of the Board of Admiralty was collective: the Board, composed of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, acted in place of the Lord High Admiral, whose powers had been put 'in commission'. In practice, it had long been apparent that the minister – at least if he wished – transcended his fellow lords.<sup>4</sup> But more than precedent ensured Barham's domination of his Board. As has been shown by Dr Lloyd Phillips, birth, deference and faith helped to subordinate the other sea officers on the Board. Notably, the two senior ones, James Gambier and Philip Patton, were Barham's protégés. Moreover, Gambier was Lady Barham's nephew, and a fellow evangelical. Patton, if neither evangelical nor related, was a fellow Scot.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> J. Barrow, *An Auto-Biographical Memoir of Sir John Barrow, Bart, Late of the Admiralty* . . . (London, 1847), 277. Middleton's letters to Henry Dundas, BL Additional MS 41079, for instance 1 June 1804, 71–8. Letter to J. D. Thomson, 23 Dec. 1804, Middleton Papers, MID 13/1/69. To Pitt, MID 2/40/51. Though see I. Lloyd Phillips, *The Evangelical Administrator: Sir Charles Middleton at the Navy Board, 1778–1790* (Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1975), 320.

<sup>3</sup> Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, 251, 307.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Henry Dundas to Lord Spencer, 29 Jan. and 5 May 1798, J. Corbett and H. W. Richmond (eds.), *Private Papers of George, Second Earl Spencer*, 4 vols. (London, 1913–24), II, 239f. and 332–4.

<sup>5</sup> I. Lloyd Phillips, 'Lord Barham at the Admiralty, 1805–6', *Mariner's Mirror*, 64 (1978), 217–33.

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Barham's control over business was also ensured through his codification of his powers. Soon after coming into office, he laid it down that the First Lord was to be responsible for the superintendence and arrangement of business, particularly appointments and promotions. This meant that he had formally drawn into his own hands all the main threads of business, including the crucial one of patronage. He did not take over control of all appointments, but had the last word in the Admiralty when it came to the senior ones. It is clear from his correspondence that he believed the main key to naval efficiency was getting the right man in the right appointment. He also wished to define the powers of the administrators, and was the first formally to separate the responsibilities of the lords of Admiralty and their two secretaries. This was really a necessary accompaniment to his defining the powers of the First Lord: his own powers could not have been safeguarded unless those of the other members of the Board were fixed.

What his division of work also seems to have done was to freeze a particular balance of numbers between the naval lords and the civilian or Civil Lords. Back in the eighteenth century, the balance had been highly variable. For instance, for over a quarter of Lord Sandwich's long tenure as First Lord (1771 to 1782) there was only one 'professional lord'; there were only two even during the American War. The expanding naval war of the 1790s called for more naval appointees, but variations continued, not just in the number of naval lords, but whether they were actually serving at the Board, or – accepted eighteenth-century practice – had been given a command at sea while remaining Lords Commissioners. One change was made in the Lords Commissioners Barham inherited from his predecessor, the first Viscount Melville (the former Henry Dundas), but there remained a balance of three naval against three civil, and Barham's separation of duties between the former helped establish their number as the norm. The separation also had the tendency to make it less likely that any naval lord would again be sent to command at sea, and for the same reason that acted against any reduction from three – specific duties would be left behind which those remaining would have to pick up. It did happen again after he had retired, but apparently the last case was in 1811–12.

Barham's division of powers at the Board was not later followed faithfully. Nevertheless, certain important precedents were being set, and it would be useful to list what he laid down. One prefatory note. Barham might have been senior in naval rank to Gambier, but the latter was still the one described as 'First Professional Lord',

what would become known as the Senior Naval Lord and, ultimately, First Sea Lord.<sup>6</sup>

#### First Professional Lord

Superintends when First Lord absent. Military correspondence, including with Port Admirals. With the approval of the First Lord, ship movements, and orders to captains and admirals. Ships' equipment. Distribution of seamen and marines. Checks all promotions.

#### Second Professional Lord

Correspondence with the subordinate boards and organisations.

#### Third Professional Lord

The appointment of all commission and warrant officers, under the inspection of the First Lord.

#### Civil Lords

'In order to keep the Sea Lords uninterrupted in the various important duties committed to their Charge – the Civil Lords will sign all the Orders, Protections & Warrants daily issued from the Office. They will also assist the Board with their advice.'

#### The First Secretary

Opens and sorts incoming post, assisted by the Second Secretary. Minutes common letters Board does not need to consider. Sends down Board minutes and draft letters to be written by the clerks, and checks and signs the consequent letters. Countersigns the ordinary commissions, warrants &c. signed by the Board. Supervises and controls the Admiralty Office, distributing its business. Receives visitors, except when the Board meets, and executes any incidental matters.

#### The Second Secretary

Keeps up the Board Minute Book. Sees all applications for the discharge of pressed men, and reports from the Port Admiral and other officers on that and similar subjects. Examines reports for the Signal Stations, Rendezvous, and Sea Fencibles. Superintends the telegraph. When necessary, writes and copies confidential letters. Relieves the First Secretary in everything.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean. A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* (London, 2004), 480, suggests Barham was the first to use the term 'First Sea Lord'.

<sup>7</sup> From two memoranda of 1805, *Business of the Board and General Arrangement of Business*, Middleton Papers, MID 6/10. Partly summarised.

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One curiosity in the above is the rather dismissive attitude towards the Civil Lords: their duties seem to be merely signing despatches their naval colleagues were too rushed to deal with. The implied need for advice seems almost a sop. Yet at the time of writing two of the three Civil Lords had more naval administrative experience than almost any of their colleagues. One was Sir Philip Stephens, who had been one of the Admiralty secretaries from 1759 to 1795, after which he was made a Lord Commissioner. The other was Sir Evan Nepean, Stephens's successor as First Secretary until early 1804, when he left the Admiralty to be Secretary for Ireland, returning later the same year as a Lord Commissioner. Stephens, it appears, remained assiduous, despite being even older than Barham. Nepean, though, was constrained first by having to continue to deal with Irish administrative duties he had not been able to relinquish when he returned to the Admiralty, and second by quarrelling with Marsden. The third, William Dickenson, was a quite different case; his position was weak because of his youth (he was still in his thirties), inexperience and some maladroitness.<sup>8</sup> Thus, at best, only one of the Civil Lords could have taken much of a burden of duties in 1805, and even he does not seem to have had a leading role. Not that Civil Lords necessarily had much influence: quite the reverse. Dickenson was a typical appointee: a tyro statesman, trying to get experience en route to higher office. His later career was disappointing; for the civil lordship as a stepping-stone to better things we should look rather to the case of Lord Palmerston (Civil Lord 1807–9). But whatever the talent that later brought a man eminence, not much was expected while he was still a Civil Lord. It was with justice that Admiralty Civil Lords had applied to them the description Canning gave of the functions of the junior lords of the Treasury: 'to make a House, to keep a House, and to cheer the Minister'.<sup>9</sup>

Turning to the duties of the professional lords, we find some obvious responsibilities for the top-level of a naval department, such as manning, and officer appointment and promotion. There is also one whose appointment will be familiar to all who know about the duties of the later First Sea Lords – responsibility (subject to the approval of the First Lord) for naval operations. It is interesting that we find this from the very beginning of separate functions at the Board. Otherwise,

<sup>8</sup> R. G. Thorne, *The History of Parliament. The House of Commons 1790–1820*, 5 vols. (London, 1986), III, 596–8; IV, 654; V, 265f.

<sup>9</sup> See D. A. Baugh, *Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton, 1965), 76, quoting Sir James Graham quoting Canning.