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978-0-521-76809-2 - The Foundations of British Maritime Ascendancy: Resources, Logistics and the State, 1755-1815

Roger Morriss

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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Until the twentieth century, Britain's maritime history – then largely naval history – was written to inspire pride and emulation in its readers. It has given rise to a triumphal view of the expansion of Britain's maritime empire, naval power and economic wealth, the heroes of which have been statesmen, military officers and gentlemen capitalists. This largely class-bound history has fostered an understanding of Britain's status in the maritime world that has tended to ignore, indeed disdain, clerical skills, labour, transportation and supply. After all, these were the work of working men and servants. Almost at the bottom of a hierarchy of explanation for Britain's maritime ascendancy has been bureaucracy. Throughout British history the back-room bureaucrats have often been scapegoats for the blame of its military leaders. The consequence has been disregard for, if not deliberate derision of, the organisation which has always been necessary to ventures beyond Britain's shores.

This book turns this scale of values on its head. It attaches great importance to the bureaucratic culture which evolved under the aegis of the state during the eighteenth century. By 'culture' here is meant simply a way of thinking and performing tasks – in this case, ones necessary to the state. Naturally, both were shaped by historical legacy and by public opinion, which in Britain had a particular capacity for influence through the political structure of the state. Often overlooked, but fundamental to these environmental influences, was Britain's maritime nature. Here the inner working of the British state is correlated to its role in the maritime world. It is an approach which is offered in complement to existing explanations. For these, being drawn from imperial, military and economic history, have their strengths as well as limitations as sources of explanation for Britain's maritime ascendancy between 1755 and 1815.

Imperial history has been struggling to achieve unity.<sup>1</sup> Until the late twentieth century, it was split by the loss of the American colonies into

<sup>1</sup> A. Webster, *The Debate on the Rise of the British Empire* (Manchester, 2006), 68–116.

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the ‘first British empire’ of self-governing Anglo-Saxon communities,<sup>2</sup> and a second in the east consisting of indigenous peoples ruled by colonial governors.<sup>3</sup> That division has only recently been bridged by focus on continuities of culture and identity.<sup>4</sup> Since then Peter Marshall has enhanced unity by observing how war, conquest and loss transformed ideas about the nature, ethics and organisation of empire.<sup>5</sup> At the same time historians dealing with the acquisition of territories in both east and west have identified among contemporary statesmen, both before and after the beginning of the American War of Independence in 1775, a common reluctance to take on new responsibilities without real necessity.

Before 1775 popular support for the protection of colonies was jingoistic.<sup>6</sup> Yet state policy, as Daniel Baugh has argued, was pragmatic. Trade was preferred to property: ‘Possession, settlement, governance and territorial defence entailed needless and unwise costs [and were avoided] so long as trade could be carried on otherwise.’ Territories acquired in wartime were generally employed as bartering counters, returned at peace to recoup losses elsewhere. They were taken to deprive an enemy of trade revenues or of privateer bases and rarely to add to the existing empire or for the purpose of creating a naval base.<sup>7</sup> It was a policy that re-emerged during the Napoleonic War.

Pragmatism persisted after 1775 with good reason. Acquisition by the East India Company of the right to collect the revenues of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa after the battles of 1757 and 1764 created uncertainty about how to manage the company. To control costs and corruption, the India Act of 1773 gave the state oversight of the company’s accounts. That of 1784 created a Governor General, the board of Control and vice-presidencies in India. That of 1813 placed the company’s territories under the control of the Crown. But, as Hew Bowen has shown, trade profits and tax revenues were still largely eaten up by the costs of maintaining military forces in India. Empire remained a financial liability,

<sup>2</sup> P. J. Marshall, ‘The First British Empire’ in *OHBE* (5 vols., Oxford, 1999), V, 43–53, discussing J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (1883) and V. T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire* (1952).

<sup>3</sup> C. A. Bayly, ‘The Second British Empire’ in *OHBE*, V, 44–72.

<sup>4</sup> P. J. Marshall, ‘Introduction’ to vol. II, *The Eighteenth Century*, in *OHBE*: 1–27.

<sup>5</sup> P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India and America c. 1750–1783* (Oxford, 2005), 25–44.

<sup>6</sup> J. Brewer, ‘The eighteenth-century British state: contexts and issues’ and K. Wilson, ‘Empire of virtue’ in *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815*, ed. L. Stone (London, 1994), 52–71, 128–64.

<sup>7</sup> D. A. Baugh, ‘Maritime strength and Atlantic commerce. The uses of “a grand marine empire”’ in *An Imperial State at War*, ed. Stone, 185–223.

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paid for from the proceeds of trade – moreover, that to China rather than India.<sup>8</sup>

If imperial history has found uniting themes, military history has remained divided into that of the navy and of the army, although several historians have written about amphibious operations.<sup>9</sup> For the period between 1755 and 1815, the navy has been regarded as the more important to British maritime ascendancy. After all, even before the Seven Years' War, it had demonstrated its power to erode the shipping and navies of Britain's enemies. It denied use of the sea to the latter, while providing protection to Britain's own trade, and did much to safeguard a maritime economy that provided a significant proportion – although not as much as might be assumed – of the revenues and loan capital necessary to Britain's military operations.<sup>10</sup> Then, and subsequently, the navy's role has appeared vital to Britain's financial capability.<sup>11</sup>

But naval power had its limitations. Victories made little impact on the continental dominance of France.<sup>12</sup> Naval power was effective against states with oceanic and coastal trades but not on those without them.<sup>13</sup> Blockade distorted economies but did not destroy them.<sup>14</sup> To exhaust continental powers demanded allies willing to take them on, the payment of subsidies on a huge scale,<sup>15</sup> and the military involvement of Britain on the continent. Sea power thus had to be complemented by land power, a factor which transformed state investment in the armed forces during wartime, and made the finance and supply of the army as important to Britain's ascendancy as the maintenance of a navy. After all, bases,

<sup>8</sup> H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge, 2006), 3–19, 222–45.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, R. Harding, 'Sailors and gentlemen of parade: some professional and technical problems concerning the conduct of combined operations in the eighteenth century'; P. Mackesy, 'Problems of an amphibious power: Britain against France, 1793–1815'; and D. Syrett, 'The methodology of British amphibious operations during the Seven Years' and American Wars' – all in *Naval History 1680–1850*, ed. R. Harding (Burlington, VT, and Aldershot, 2006), 127–47, 117–26, 309–20, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> *The Influence of History on Mahan*, ed. J. B. Hattendorf (Newport, RI, 1991), discussing A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660–1783* (1890).

<sup>11</sup> P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London, 1976), 97–147, and *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London, 1989), 167–9.

<sup>12</sup> E. Ingram, 'Illusions of victory: the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar revisited', *Military Affairs* 48(1984), 140–3.

<sup>13</sup> R. Harding, *The Evolution of the Sailing Navy, 1509–1815* (Basingstoke, 1995), 120, 140.

<sup>14</sup> F. Crouzet, 'Wars, blockade and economic change in Europe 1792–1815', *Journal of Economic History* 24(1964), 567–88.

<sup>15</sup> J. M. Sherwig, *Guineas and Gunpowder: British Foreign Aid in the Wars with France 1793–1815* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 345–6.

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colonies and strategic territory could only be held by land forces, which in amphibious operations were the point of the spear.

Important though they might appear, the relationships of the navy to empire and to economic growth in the maritime sphere were, and still are, matters of faith. In 1964 Gerald Graham could assert unequivocally that without ‘command of the sea there would have been no British empire’.<sup>16</sup> Although he acknowledges the many conditional factors, the title of Nicholas Rodger’s most recent volume in his new naval history maintains that view.<sup>17</sup> Yet in 1999 Barry Gough claimed ‘the general linkage of navy to empire continues to escape historians, perhaps because the task [of establishing connections] is such a daunting one’.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between naval power and merchant shipping is also questionable. The American advocate of sea power, A. T. Mahan, argued that nations ‘advanced to power at sea’ through ‘service of their [merchant] ships’.<sup>19</sup> But the relationship did not always operate in reverse. Ralph Davis noticed that during wartime before 1783 naval vessels ‘were always too few to be fully effective’.<sup>20</sup> It was a problem that persisted especially for the coastal trade and in spite of the Convoy Act of 1798 which made convoy compulsory for most ocean-going vessels.<sup>21</sup>

As a source of explanation, British economic history has suffered as much from division as imperial and military history. Its maritime component has been graced by just a few distinguished scholars. Yet, as an island state, Britain needed shipping for the import of naval stores, food and industrial raw materials, for trade, and for the transportation of its armed forces with the supplies they needed. About a tenth of Britain’s ocean-going shipping was under hire to the state by the end of the eighteenth century. State employment aided the growth of shipping which in turn contributed to economic expansion, for ship managers were able to cheapen transport costs for their customers, facilitating capital

<sup>16</sup> G. S. Graham, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy: Studies in British Maritime Ascendancy* (Cambridge, 1965), 3.

<sup>17</sup> N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain 1649–1815* (London, 2004); see also his ‘Sea-power and Empire, 1688–1793’ in *OHBE*, II, 169–83; *British Naval Documents*, 326–31.

<sup>18</sup> B. M. Gough, ‘The Royal Navy and empire’ in *OHBE*, V, 327–41.

<sup>19</sup> A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660–1783* (Boston, MA, 1890, repr. 1965), 53.

<sup>20</sup> R. Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Newton Abbot, 1962, repr. 1972), 315–37.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the complaint of losses to privateers suffered by contractors shipping provisions from Ireland to London, who claimed that the English Channel from Scilly to the Forelands was infested with French privateers: NMM, ADM. BP/30B, 15 Nov. 1810.

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accumulation and investment elsewhere in the economy.<sup>22</sup> Already global in operation by 1755, with distinct regions of trade and specialisation, the shipping industry flourished despite the recurrence of war, partly under the Navigation Laws that still endeavoured to preserve colonial trade for English ships.<sup>23</sup>

The flexibility, economies and military importance of shipping for an island state have been under-acknowledged. So too has its importance in carrying the trade that contributed indirect taxation to the financing of wars in the eighteenth century. To John Brewer in *The Sineews of Power*, shipping was no more than a victim of hostilities. For Cain and Hopkins, it was only important after 1850 as a link between ‘gentlemanly capitalism’ practised in the City of London and that in the outposts of empire.<sup>24</sup> Brewer terminated his examination of the ‘fiscal-military state’ in 1783, while Cain and Hopkins were ‘notably thin on everything before the 1790s’.<sup>25</sup> Patrick O’Brien’s essays demonstrate the growth of Britain’s financial capability throughout the period of hostilities. Yet even his focus on the fiscal state, in which trade revenues played a major part, tends to ignore the importance for Britain of shipping.<sup>26</sup>

Ironically, since publication of *The Sineews of Power*, the preoccupation with finance as the mainspring of state power has given rise to studies of the financial arrangements of other eighteenth-century states and reduced the apparent exceptionality of Britain’s methods of raising money, if not the scale and stamina of that capability.<sup>27</sup> Less distinguished by fiscal-military arrangements, the question of what gave Britain the ability to become the dominant power at sea remains open. In this study the maritime nature of the British economy assumes great importance. But even more important was the bureaucratic culture of the British state.

This book examines that culture in operation, in the supply of the military forces that Britain projected throughout the world between 1755

<sup>22</sup> S. Ville, ‘The growth of specialization in English shipowning, 1750–1850’, *EconHR* 46, 4(1993), 702–22, and ‘Total factor productivity in the English shipping industry: the north-east coal trade, 1700–1850’, *EconHR* 39, 3(1986), 355–70.

<sup>23</sup> R. Davis, *Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, 300–14; S. Ville, *English Shipowning during the Industrial Revolution: Michael Henley and Son, London Shipowners, 1770–1830* (Manchester, 1987), 59, 95, 129.

<sup>24</sup> J. Brewer, *The Sineews of Power: War, Money and the English State 1688–1783* (London, 1989), 197–8; P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688–1914* (Harlow, 1993), 170–1, 179–80.

<sup>25</sup> B. Lenman, *Britain’s Colonial Wars 1688–1783* (Harlow, 2001), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Most notable is P. K. O’Brien, ‘The political economy of British taxation, 1660–1815’, *EconHR* 2nd ser. 41, 1(1988), 1–32.

<sup>27</sup> P. K. O’Brien, ‘Fiscal exceptionalism: Great Britain and its European rivals from Civil War to triumph at Trafalgar and Waterloo’ in *The Political Economy of British Historical Experience 1688–1914*, ed. D. Winch and P. K. O’Brien (Oxford, 2002), 245–65.

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and 1815. Chapters deal successively with the supply of strategic ideas, finance, the navy, ordnance, manpower, food, shipping and the organisation serving land forces overseas. The common factors in the examination of each are the resources, organisation, methods and innovations with which the servants of the state met the needs of Britain's armed forces around the world. For much of the time, these servants included merchants and ship owners, acting under contract, as well as the central commissioners, their clerks and agents in Britain and abroad. How the private sector was employed and trained was an important aspect of each branch of state service. This book is thus particularly concerned with the attitudes and practices that made for efficiency of performance, and for the smooth coordination of the public and private sectors.

For this, the role of the state was critical in providing a framework for the regulation of international and domestic relations, social order and commercial business.<sup>28</sup> It provided a legal framework which was subject to changing attitudes and meant that, as Peter Marshall suggested, government gradually adapted to movements in contemporary ethics as well as administrative and organisational ideas. These ethics and ideas supplied the cement that provided cohesion between the state and its servants, especially those in the private sector. It was their cooperation that made for economic strength and was the foundation of military initiatives and expansion. But, as this book will show, it was the thinking, organisation and administrative ability of the bureaucracy at the heart of the state, founded on an expanding maritime economy and financial capability, which made Britain the dominant power at sea between 1755 and 1815.

<sup>28</sup> P. K. O'Brien, 'Central government and the economy, 1688-1815' in *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, ed. R. Floud and D. McCloskey (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1994), 205-41.

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## 1 The British state in evolution

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During the second half of the eighteenth century the power of the British state grew. It drew that strength from within from those who wielded power locally and in commerce. Driven by war, the state grew and developed efficient forms of managing innovation and change. Ideas about the efficiency of organisation shifted, with a view to the production of greater motivation among its servants. Management of the state's resources was placed in the hands of men open to new thinking, and ready to consult those with expert knowledge. With competition, resources were always in short supply, but policy towards them was equally concerned with the removal of obstacles to existing sources as with enlargement of the resource base. State law reflected this reduction of restrictions, but was balanced by the growing framework in law and policy of equity between the state and its servants in the private sector, whether small-scale contractors or great commercial companies. Ideas, management, policy and law all shaped the logistics of state supply. They made for a state which could summon, control, organise and provide resources for its armed forces throughout the globe.

### **The British state**

The structure, culture and capabilities of the British state developed during the second half of the eighteenth century. Its growing power was reflected in the perceptions of its leading economic critics. Writing on the eve of the American Revolution, Adam Smith assigned to it a small role, limiting its duties to defence, administration of justice and the performance of certain public works. The state, he proposed, should simply create a milieu suited to the uninhibited conduct of private enterprise which could be conducted more efficiently by private entrepreneurs than by public bureaucrats.<sup>1</sup> Writing four decades later, after experience of

<sup>1</sup> J. J. Spengler, 'Adam Smith's theory of economic growth, parts I-II' in *Adam Smith: Critical Assessments*, ed. J. Cunningham Wood (3 vols., Beckenham, Kent, 1983), III, 110-31.

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population growth, urbanisation, industrial and agricultural expansion, David Ricardo realised the state could also affect capital accumulation, investment and employment, and was critical to the well-being of its subjects.<sup>2</sup>

*The sources of its power*

Historians writing about the British state have tended to reflect this change in view of contemporaries. Writing of the mid eighteenth century, Stephen Conway located the strength of the state in its partnership with private and local interests. It relied on the assistance of local Justices of the Peace and on the tax-raising capability of Parliament. He emphasised the ‘overlapping and competing jurisdictions’ of government departments and the relative autonomy of privateers, the regiments raised by noblemen and the army of the East India Company. On the one hand, he suggests the dependence of the state on contractors and financiers was a weakness. On the other, he argues that the ability to pay and equip the armed forces through contractors on terms set by the state was a strength in which there was growing confidence, a product of repeated wars, growing expenditure, experience and efficiency.<sup>3</sup>

Conway’s explanation for growing confidence in the state’s strength holds true for the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. By the time of Ricardo that strength was used to regulate industry, commerce and social problems. Historians recognise the state’s power and the attitudes which made for reform.<sup>4</sup> But the sources of that power and those attitudes in developments during the periods of hostilities prior to 1815 tend to have been ignored.<sup>5</sup>

Yet these wartime developments took palpable form in the growth of bureaucracy. Even by later standards, that bureaucracy was not small. At the very beginning of the eighteenth century, employees of the state have been estimated at 12,000, with 114 commissioners sitting on 18 different

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Hollander, ‘The work and influence of Ricardo’, and D. V. Ramana, ‘Ricardo’s environment’, in *David Ricardo. Critical Assessments*, ed. J. Cunningham Wood (4 vols., Beckenham, Kent, 1985), I, 42–5, 196–208, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> S. Conway, *War, State and Society in Mid-Eighteenth Century Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2006), 31–55.

<sup>4</sup> U. Henriques, ‘Jeremy Bentham and the machinery of social reform’ in *British Government and Administration: Studies presented to S. B. Chrimes*, ed. H. Hearder and H. R. Loyn (Cardiff, 1974), 169–86.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, E. J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain* (Harlow, 1983; 3rd edn, 2001).



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boards.<sup>6</sup> By 1797 the figure had reached 16,267, and by 1815 24,598.<sup>7</sup> Some central offices remained small. In 1793 the Treasury, Home Office and Foreign Office contained only 17, 19 and 19 personnel respectively. But the Navy Office in 1792 had a staff of 98 established with 10 extra clerks;<sup>8</sup> and by 1813 it had grown to 151 established with 80 extra clerks – a total of 231. The Victualling Office grew from 65 in 1787 to 105 staff by 1805.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile the Admiralty Office, with 45 personnel in 1797, grew to 65 in 1815.<sup>10</sup> The departments that grew most dealt with the state's finances and military requirements. Just those dealing with finance, by 1755, numbered 6,484 employees, and by 1782/3 this had risen to 8,292.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile the Royal dockyards – which were enlarged in wartime and reduced in peace – grew from around 8,100 employees about 1745 to more than 15,000 in 1815.<sup>12</sup>

The scale of the fiscal and military departments reflected the workload they bore. By 1755 the British state possessed a financial system capable of rivalling that of any other European power and it had the most powerful navy in Europe. Its West Indian and American colonies were part of an Atlantic economy that was served by a merchant fleet that rivalled that of the Dutch. After 1755 the state built on these assets. During the Seven Years' War, Britain was manifestly the most dynamic state in Europe. The loss of her American colonies in 1783 temporarily diminished that standing but not the latent power and dynamism. Britain's expansion in India, south-east Asia, the South Pacific and the West Indies between 1755 and 1815 was a product of this underlying strength.

War built state power. A 'cycle of war and state formation' has long been recognised.<sup>13</sup> 'War became the great flywheel for the whole political enterprise of the modern state . . . the constant rivalry among the powers . . . produced an unheard-of exertion of energy, especially military and financial energy'.<sup>14</sup> For maritime powers, the growth of naval power was

<sup>6</sup> Brewer (quoting G. Holmes), 'The eighteenth-century British state'.

<sup>7</sup> P. Harling and P. Mandler, 'From "fiscal-military" state to laissez-faire state, 1760–1850', *JBS* 32(1993), 44–70.

<sup>8</sup> C. Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793–1815* (London, 1979), 9.

<sup>9</sup> R. Knight, 'Politics and trust in victualling the navy, 1793–1815', *MM* 94(2008), 133–49. But see also NMM, ADM. DP/27, 21 Feb. 1807.

<sup>10</sup> NMM, ADM. BP/28A, 25 Mar. 1828; ADM. DP/201B, n.d.

<sup>11</sup> Brewer, *The Sinews of Power*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> D. A. Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton, NJ, 1965), 264; R. Morriss, *The Royal Dockyards during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Leicester, 1983), 106.

<sup>13</sup> B. D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics* (New York, 1974), 36–9, 58–9, 72–121.

<sup>14</sup> T. Ertman (quoting O. Hintze), 'The Sinews of Power and European state-building theory' in *An Imperial State at War*, ed. Stone, 33–51.

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as important to state building as armies were to land-bound states.<sup>15</sup> The way Britain grew appears not to have been different from other states.<sup>16</sup> Agreements between the governing power and interest groups facilitated the extraction of revenues, usage of manpower, protection of trade and investment in military forces.<sup>17</sup> Jan Glete argues that political transformation went hand in hand with military transformation and that resource problems were normally solved by resort to the commercial market. Glete refers particularly to early modern states but his observations apply equally to state development in Britain in the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

State bureaucracy served as the linchpin of military force and the commercial market. Britain's bureaucracy already had a shape and character formed by the experience of the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup> Basic structures were in place and tested during the War of William III, the first of the series of wars with France and its allies.<sup>20</sup> A growing workload, increasing numbers of state employees and knowledge of political arithmetic improved bureaucratic efficiency by 1715.<sup>21</sup> Repeated wars after 1739 enhanced this efficiency. By the time of the Napoleonic War, Britain's bureaucracy would conduct the business of war with all the authority and regulation it would later apply to the social problems of the mid nineteenth century.

Fundamental to the power of the state was its financial system. That too developed, as did the attitudes to the state's system of war funding. Before 1793 the national debt was a cause of concern central to parliamentary politics. Indeed before 1765 Parliament routinely limited military expenditure. However, after 1793, the national debt gradually lost its horror. The state set time limits on short-term debt and increased the rate at which the navy was funded. At the same time the introduction

<sup>15</sup> J. Glete, *Navies and Nations: Warships, Navies and State-building in Europe and America, 1500–1860* (2 vols., Stockholm, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Ertman, 'The Sinews of Power and European state-building theory'.

<sup>17</sup> J. Glete, *Warfare at Sea, 1500–1650: Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe* (London, 2000), 60–75, 186–7.

<sup>18</sup> J. Glete, *War and the State in Early Modern Europe: Spain, the Dutch Republic and Sweden as Fiscal-Military States, 1500–1660* (Abingdon, 2002), 43–66, 213–17.

<sup>19</sup> For a summary examination of British naval administration at its crucial formative stage, see Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 95–111.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, 'A scheme for governing the business of Victualling the Navy, of Commissary General of the Land Forces and of Commissioner for Transports under one Management', 1 October 1686; and 'Some few Reasons for managing the Victualling by a Commission rather than by Contract', May 1698; both TNA, T.48/89, fos.167–8, 275–7.

<sup>21</sup> J. H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England* (London, 1967, repr. 1980), 11–12, 116–22.