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

Roger Morriss

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The Foundations of British Maritime Ascendancy

British power and global expansion between 1755 and 1815 have mainly been attributed to the fiscal-military state and the achievements of the Royal navy at sea. Roger Morriss here sheds new light on the broader range of developments in the infrastructure of the state needed to extend British power at sea and overseas. He demonstrates how developments in culture, experience and control in central government affected the supply of ships, manpower, food, transport and ordnance as well as the support of the army, permitting the maintenance of armed forces of unprecedented size and their projection to distant stations. He reveals how the British state, although dependent on the private sector, built a partnership with it based on trust, ethics and the law. This book argues that Britain's military bureaucracy, traditionally regarded as inferior to the fighting services, was in fact the keystone of the nation's maritime ascendancy.

ROGER MORRISS is Senior Lecturer in the Department of History, University of Exeter, and General Editor of the Navy Records Society. His previous publications include *Naval Power and British Culture, 1760–1850: Public Trust and Government Ideology* (2004).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press,
New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521768092

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First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Morriss, Roger.

The foundations of British maritime ascendancy : resources, logistics and the State, 1755–1815 / Roger Morriss.

p. cm. – (Cambridge Military histories)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-76809-2 (hardback)

1. Great Britain – History, Naval – 18th century. 2. Great Britain – History, Naval – 19th century. 3. Sea-power – Great Britain – History – 18th century.

4. Sea-power – Great Britain – History – 19th century. 5. Great Britain –

Politics and government – 18th century. 6. Great Britain – Politics and

government – 19th century. I. Title. II. Series.

DA87.M67 2010

359.00941'09033 – dc22 2010035498

ISBN 978-0-521-76809-2 Hardback

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Preface

Britain emerged from the wars between 1755 and 1815 with the world's greatest overseas empire; with the reputation of a great military power; and with trade and industry that culminated in the world's first industrial revolution. Britain's maritime ascendancy in the period 1755–1815 has been vital to the formation of the British national identity. Much has been written about its achievement. Contemporary mercantilists pointed out the importance of colonies and of seaborne trade for an island state. Nineteenth-century naval officers claimed a 'natural naval superiority over . . . continental neighbours whose habits and feelings are drawn more particularly to land operations'.¹ More recently, great importance has been attached to Britain's financial system at a time when, to contemporaries, 'security, trade, empire and military power really mattered'.² Colonies, naval power and money were all visible and vital manifestations of power. This book looks for the nexus of that power in the organisation of the state and the culture of its servants.

In seeking that central source of Britain's power, this book examines 'the logistics' of British maritime ascendancy. This word is now commonly used with regard to the provision of a chain of supply. Before the mid twentieth century, it was little used. Neither 'logistics' nor the word 'supply' appear in the index of C. Oman's book on *Wellington's Army*, written before the First World War. Indeed, indicative of the contemporary order of interest, Oman's chapter on the army Commissariat comes after those on uniforms and weapons. But, almost in his final sentence, Oman admits: 'That the Peninsular War was successfully maintained . . . was surely, at bottom, the work of the much maligned commissaries'.³ Now that order of priority is reversed. Military historians speak of power projection, the complement to which is support by supply. In *Rethinking*

¹ Sir George Cockburn to Sir Thomas Cochrane, 15 Sept. 1850, NLS 2291, fo. 176.

² P. K. O'Brien, 'Political preconditions for the Industrial Revolution' in *The Industrial Revolution and British Society*, ed. P. K. O'Brien and R. Quinault (Cambridge, 1993), 124–55.

³ C. Oman, *Wellington's Army 1809–1814* (London, 1913), 319.

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Military History, Jeremy Black acknowledges ‘the powers best able to wage war were those who got close to a synthesis of military organisation and political/administrative capacity’.⁴

In the eighteenth century, ‘national characters and manners were closely integrated into economic diagnoses’. At the beginning of the present century, Emma Rothschild re-focussed ‘on matters of *geist* or *esprit* as the source of Britain’s success as a global maritime and mercantile power’. She emphasised the importance of protection, communication and trade by sea to British ways of thinking.⁵ Here that maritime character of British thinking is reinforced with an awareness that the political as well as the geographical environment was important to maritime power. Britain’s relationship with the sea shaped the nature of the state as well as its people. It also shaped an economy in which long-distance trade was cheap and convenient compared to that carried out by land. The combination of maritime economy and state in turn fostered branches of supply that were capable of maintaining Britain’s armed forces wherever they were located throughout the world.

This capability of the British state lay partly in the experience that accrued through half a century of overseas operations; partly in its effective union with the private sector; and partly in the development of an efficient administrative infrastructure. The relationship between the state and wider society was vital. For not only did the state draw motivation, resources and ethics from society, the state in turn affected the way in which society developed through spending and war. The relationship developed a unique capability in logistical matters nurtured in the bureaucracy of the British state.

Much here remains for analysis. Each aspect of state operation has had its historian, but the data available for each still require a team of statisticians. This book scratches the surface and suggests trends of development. For support in its research and writing, I must thank a range of colleagues, both past and present. As always, I am grateful to Roger Knight with whom interests have been shared for nearly forty years. More recently, Michael Duffy and Jeremy Black have generously given moral support and encouragement, while the managers of the History Department at Exeter University have provided the time to write, without which nothing could have been done. Stephen End read parts of the manuscript while Gareth Cole and John Day provided insights, for which I shall always be grateful. The staffs of the National Archives of

⁴ J. Black, *Rethinking Military History* (London, 2004), 163–4.

⁵ E. Rothschild, ‘The English Kopf’ in *The Political Economy of British Historical Experience 1688–1914*, ed. P. K. O’Brien and D. Winch (Oxford, 2002), 31–60.

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the United Kingdom, the National Maritime Museum and Royal Naval Museum have my thanks for the indispensable service they provide. A range of other librarians and archivists remain unnamed but remembered. The Rhode Island Historical Society kindly gave permission for quotation from the papers of Christopher Champlin. Michael Watson, Leigh Mueller and Cambridge University Press have been unfailingly helpful. For errors of fact and interpretation, the writer of course remains responsible and he awaits their illumination with interest.

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Glossary of British weights, measures, casks and money values

British measure	Abbreviation used here	Metric equivalent
<i>Avoirdupois Weights</i>		
1 dram	dram	1.77 grammes
1 ounce (16 drams)	oz	28.35 grammes
1 pound (16 ounces)	lb	0.45 kilograms
1 quarter (28 pounds)	qtr	12.7 kilograms
1 hundred-weight (112 pounds)	cwt	50.8 kilograms
1 ton (20 hundredweights)	ton	1.02 tonnes
<i>Linear Measures</i>		
1 inch	in	25.39 millimetres
1 foot (12 inches)	ft	0.30 metres
1 yard (3 feet)	yard	0.91 metres
1 mile (1,760 yards)	mile	1.61 kilometres
<i>Measures of Capacity</i>		
1 pint	pint	0.57 litres
1 gallon (8 pints)	gall	4.55 litres
1 peck (2 gallons)	peck	9.09 litres
1 bushel (8 gallons)	bush	3.64 dekalitres
1 tun (252 gallons)	tun	1,146.6 litres
<i>Casks</i>		
1 firkin (9 gallons)		
1 half-barrel (2 firkins, 18 gallons)		
1 barrel (2 half-barrels, 36 gallons)		
1 tierce (35 gallons, one third of a pipe, 42 gallons by twentieth century)		

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1 puncheon (varied, 72-120 gallons, becoming standardised at 72 gallons)

1 butt (varied, 105-40 gallons, becoming standardised at 108 gallons)

1 pipe (105 gallons)

Money Values

1 farthing $\frac{1}{4}$ d

1 half-penny (2 farthings) $\frac{1}{2}$ d

1 penny (2 half-pennies) d

1 shilling (12 pence) s

1 pound (20 shillings) £

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Abbreviations

<i>BIHR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research</i>
BL	British Library
<i>British Naval Documents</i>	<i>British Naval Documents 1204–1960</i> , ed. J. B. Hattendorf, R. J. B. Knight, A. W. H. Pearsall, N. A. M. Rodger and G. Till
CR	<i>House of Commons Reports</i>
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
DRO	Devon Record Office
<i>EconHR</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
<i>EHR</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>HJ</i>	<i>Historical Journal</i>
HR	<i>Historical Research</i>
HRO	Hampshire Record Office
<i>IJMH</i>	<i>International Journal of Maritime History</i>
<i>JBS</i>	<i>Journal of British Studies</i>
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Military History</i>
<i>JSAHR</i>	<i>Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research</i>
LC	Library of Congress
<i>MM</i>	<i>The Mariner's Mirror</i>
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
NLS	National Library of Scotland
NMM	National Maritime Museum
NRS	Navy Records Society
<i>OHBE</i>	<i>Oxford History of the British Empire</i> , ed. N. Canny, P. J. Marshall and R. W. Winks
<i>PP</i>	<i>Parliamentary Papers</i>
RNM	Royal Naval Museum

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TNA	The National Archives of the United Kingdom
WLC	William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan
WRP	William R. Perkins Library, Duke University