

I

Seapower and Commerce: An Atlantic Minuet

Your fleet and your trade have so near a relation, and such a mutual influence upon each other [that] they cannot be well separated; your trade is the mother and nurse of your seamen; your seamen are the life of your fleet, and your fleet is the security and protection of your trade, and both together are the wealth, strength, security and glory of Britain.

– John Thompson, Lord Haversham, in a speech in the House of Lords, 1701¹

Our Trade and Power are so linked, that they must stand or fall together. Suppose us once inferior in Force to any Nation which rivals us, and our Trade is gone. Suppose our Trade lost, and there is an end of our Force; for Money is the support of the Navy, and Trade the source of Riches.

– James Edward Oglethorpe, *The Sailor's Advocate* (London, 1728).

It is obvious that the present strength and pre-eminence of this country is owing to the extent of its resources arising from its commerce and its naval power which are inseparably connected.

– Henry Dundas, British Secretary of War, 1800.²

The Merchants of London Trading to the Coast of Africa gathered at the Senegal Coffee House in London in 1782. In the midst of heated aromas that masked the musk of their filthy lucre, the slave merchants composed a formal memorial to the British Admiralty Board. The beautifully penned and wax stamped petition detailed the “Trade from London to the Windward part of the Coast of Africa.” In this memorial, the businessmen stressed “the difficulties they labor under in procuring the regular Returns for their Merchandise in the said Trade.” The “difficulties” these profit seekers faced included the fact that Africans were demanding tribute for

passage along their coasts and waterways. When the merchants and their representatives failed to pay for the privilege of accessing slave markets, Africans used small craft to board the British commercial vessels. They then appropriated European trade goods sufficient to cover the cost of the tribute. The merchants asked the Admiralty for “an Armed Vessel to be constantly stationed” on the West Coast of Africa “for the particular service of visiting those Rivers thereby giving awe to the Inhabitants on the Banks and rendering your Memorialists’ Agents perfectly secure in their Persons and Property.” The merchants closed their memorial with a nice bit of flattery aimed at securing the Admiralty’s compliance: “your Memorialists have the greater reason to hope that your Lordships will be pleased to comply with their request from the great services they experienced during the little time Captain Hills, Commander of His Majesty’s Sloop *Zephyr*, lately arrived from Africa, remained on that Coast.”³ The Admiralty agreed to protect this profitable branch of the Atlantic slave trade, just as it had done in the past.

There was a symbiosis between the British business community and the British navy. Maritime commerce produced great wealth for British merchants and enormous tax revenue. Heads of state borrowed and used these funds to expand the size of the navy. Commercial ships and merchant mariners were also converted in times of war to warships and naval seamen. The British navy, in turn, defended and facilitated overseas trade in a wide variety of ways. “Together,” as Lord Haversham observed, Britannia’s navy and her commercial shipping helped bring “wealth, strength, security and glory” to an island kingdom and a seaborne empire.⁴

Historians have debated the extent to which state power contributed to the elaboration and maintenance of empires in the eighteenth-century Atlantic World. On the one hand, we are told that “empire” should be defined as “imperial rule.” The “elite leadership” of metropolitan heads of state, colonial governors, and military commanders determined the fates of millions around the globe. Their attitudes, the “official mind,” were what mattered.⁵ Governments chartered overseas colonies, regulated maritime commerce, and waged wars of conquest.⁶ State-sponsored churches enforced orthodoxies.⁷ Navies eradicated pirates to make the seas safe for the transoceanic transfer of peoples and goods to and from colonies.⁸

On the other hand, it is said that state power was actually fairly limited in the eighteenth century.⁹ In the case of the British Empire in the Atlantic World, Guy Chet writes:

The British Atlantic remained in the eighteenth century what it had been in the sixteenth and seventeenth – a Wild West, rather than a trading zone regulated by the British state and policed by its navy. The ocean did not become a British sea.¹⁰

The British navy was largely unsuccessful (“impotent”) at eradicating pirates from Atlantic waters.¹¹ Smuggling remained rampant in the West Indies despite various attempts by different heads of state to end it.¹² Together, smugglers and pirates established black market economies that kept colonies afloat. Even in the realm of licit commerce, law-abiding merchants largely financed and organized overseas trade without government assistance.¹³

Early modern governments were not all powerful, but neither were merchants. Entrepreneurs required help with too many facets of maritime commerce to have ever been truly self-organized. They flooded government offices with petitions for assistance in a wide range of business matters over the course of the early modern era. Governments similarly relied on merchants as a tax base and a source of loans. The close relationship between merchants and government officials was the key to England’s rise to commercial and military prominence.

The sun did not truly begin to rise over England’s seaborne empire until the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁴ Only at this point did Britannia’s navy and her commercial shipping begin to cross ocean waves in earnest.¹⁵ Only then did the English begin to rival the Dutch for maritime supremacy.¹⁶

Growth in commercial shipping and overseas trade generally preceded naval expansion. Commerce was only sustained, however, through the projection of military power.¹⁷ As the number of men and vessels employed in distributing commodities to and from overseas markets increased, the English government built and requisitioned additional warships to protect this maritime commerce. English shipping expanded dramatically after 1650. According to Ralph Davis, one of the foremost authorities on the subject, the number of vessels in England’s merchant fleet increased at an annual rate of 2 to 3 percent between 1660 and 1689.¹⁸ The tonnage of this commercial fleet expanded, as well. In 1629, the total tonnage of English-owned shipping was 115,000. By 1686, the same figure was 340,000. In 1751, the total tonnage was 421,000. By 1788, it was an impressive 1,055,000.¹⁹ In London, the largest commercial port in England, there were only 12,000 tons of shipping in 1582. This number rose to 35,000 tons of shipping in 1629, and 140,000 tons in 1702. It more than doubled to 315,000 by 1788.²⁰ To be

sure, there were lulls in the rise of English shipping.²¹ The overall pattern after 1650, however, was one of increase.

English shipping crisscrossed Atlantic trade routes. While they established territorial possessions and traded around the globe, the bulk of English shipping headed to ports of call located in Europe, the west coast of Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. According to Patrick O'Brien and Stanley Engerman:

The eighteenth century witnessed the Americanization of British trade in the sense that rising proportions of exports consisted of sales to the Americas (North and South, including the Caribbean), and increasing proportions of imports of food and raw materials also emanated from across the Atlantic. Britain ceased to be simply part of a traditional European trading network with growing interests in American and Asian markets and became the center of an Atlantic economy.²²

Trade statistics confirm the fact that English merchants and shipowners concentrated their business endeavors in the Atlantic World: 90.5 percent of English exports went to Europe in 1663, whereas 8 percent went to the "Americas" and 1.5 percent went to the "rest of the world." By 1798, only 30.1 percent of these exports went to Europe; 57.4 percent went to the Americas, while 12.5 percent went to the rest of the world.²³ In 1663, only 36,000 tons of shipping were required to meet the needs of English trade with America and the Caribbean. These needs were met with 70,000 tons of shipping in 1686, and 153,000 tons in 1771. By comparison, English trade with nearby ports in Europe and the British Isles required the second largest amount of shipping tonnage in 1771 at only 92,000.²⁴ "The most attractive prospects of trade beyond Europe appeared at first to be in Asia," Davis writes. However, European middlemen were already providing Asian spices to English consumers in the seventeenth century at reasonable rates. The English government also banned the importation of Asian textiles to encourage English manufacturing. In the long run, sugar and tobacco produced in the Americas "provided the main basis for colonial expansion, on the basis of which American far outstripped Asian trade with England well before the end of the [seventeenth] century."²⁵

Atlantic commerce was initially self-organized. Merchants mostly planned business ventures and risked assets in overseas trade on their own accord without the state's initial involvement. They established networks of trust among far-flung markets, usually by sending family members to live in these markets. As these networks solidified and multiplied, England's commercial empire thickened and expanded. This is not to say that members of

the British business community were completely autonomous and neither needed nor received any external stimulus or support. Entrepreneurial activities preceded and prompted naval expansion and military protection. Military force was necessary to sustain maritime commerce.

The English state did not seriously expand the size and scope of the English navy before 1650. In 1603, the English navy consisted of only 31 warships, which was not substantially larger than the 25 warships Elizabeth had inherited at the start of her reign. This small fleet could not perform a multitude of functions around the globe. “The Tudor navy was not built to wage an oceanic war for mastery of the rich trades or to win and protect far-flung colonies,” Kenneth R. Andrews writes.²⁶ In Paul Kennedy’s words: “the Tudor fleet was basically a water-borne home defense squadron.”²⁷

Oliver Cromwell and Parliament began to reorganize and expand England’s navy, and this naval building program was carried forward into the Restoration and beyond.²⁸ Heads of state enlarged existing shipyards and built new ones. The government actively worked to increase the number of English mariners. It promoted overseas commerce and established Navigation Acts to add tax revenue streams and replenish the solid specie in public coffers. It also enlarged bureaucracies such as the Treasury and Admiralty Boards to administer revenue collection and manage the military.

These alterations produced substantial gains in the late seventeenth century. The navy began to keep ships manned around the year beginning in 1692.²⁹ The English navy maintained a total of 158 warships (112 ships of the line and 46 cruisers) and 48,514 seamen in 1695.³⁰ Moreover, according to John Brewer, “Naval administration improved, officers were required to be examined, a statutory code of naval discipline was introduced, and successive *Fighting Instructions* advocated line-of-battle tactics to maximize naval fire-power.” Whereas the pre-1650 English navy was heavily aided by more numerous converted commercial vessels and quasi-independent crews, by the end of the seventeenth century “the royal navy emerged as a professional force, clearly distinguishable from the merchant marine.”³¹

British naval expansion accelerated during the eighteenth century to keep pace with burgeoning Atlantic commerce and colonization. The navy’s peacetime establishment was 3,000–5,000 men during the second half of the 1600s. In periods without war during the eighteenth century, the navy typically maintained 10,000–15,000 men.³² In 1710, at the height of the War of Spanish Succession (1702–13), there were 123

ships of the line, 57 cruisers, and 48,072 seamen in the British navy. In 1745, in the midst of the War of Austrian Succession (1739–48), there were 104 ships of the line, 67 cruisers, and 53,498 seamen.³³ In 1760, during the Seven Years' War (1756–63), there were 135 ships of the line, 115 cruisers, and 86,626 seamen. In 1780, at the peak of the American Revolution (1775–83), there were 117 ships of the line, 111 cruisers, and 97,898 seamen.³⁴ In 1800, during the Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815), there were 127 ships of the line, 158 cruisers, and 126,192 seamen.³⁵ In sum, during periods of peace, naval manpower increased 233 percent to 300 percent over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During periods of conflict between 1710 and 1800, the British navy expanded 58 percent in terms of the number of its warships and 162.5 percent in terms of its manpower.

English naval administrators also adjusted their strategic thinking in the wake of commercial expansion. There would remain an emphasis on defending the island nation against foreign invasion. There were always arguments about concentrating seapower to control European entry points into the Atlantic, as this was believed to be the surest means to maintain the safety of the overseas empire. But it became clear over time that there could be a mutually reinforcing relationship between the navy and the empire. Naval administrators and members of Parliament increasingly systematized a “blue water policy” over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This policy stressed the need to use seapower to defend overseas trade and territorial possessions to generate additional resources to expand England's military capacity.³⁶

By the eighteenth century, then, Britannia had gone a long way toward organizing a seaborne empire. This was not a top-down nor was it a bottom-up process. It was both. Merchants expanded overseas trade. Colonies had been planted along coastlines and seaports were established. English and then British governments built up the size of the navy to defend trade routes and colonies. Heads of state formulated a new naval strategy to expand this seaborne empire. As Britannia's navy and commercial shipping developed, a symbiotic relationship was forged between her economic capacity and her fighting force.

Commercial shipping provided the navy with ships, men, and money. Early modern navies were expensive. It took a lot of resources to construct warships. According to Brewer:

The capital assets of a large business in the early eighteenth century rarely exceeded £10,000 ... By comparison naval vessels cost a small fortune.

In the late seventeenth century the navy spent between £33,000 and £39,000 to build a first-rate ship, between £24,000 and £27,000 to build a second-rate, and between £15,000 and £17,000 to construct a third-rate vessel. By the second half of the eighteenth century the cost of constructing the largest ships had nearly doubled. In 1765 the 100-gun first-rate *Victory* cost £63,174 to build.³⁷

High maintenance costs were associated with navies, as well. Battle damage and standard wear and tear ensured that this was routinely the case. The British navy typically spent £13,000 every six months to keep a first-rate battleship at sea during the eighteenth century. The navy's total maintenance costs around mid-century were more than half a million pounds each year.³⁸ Food and drink and military stores for many months also needed to be purchased to provision fleets. Governments that wanted large navies had to find ways to pay for them.

Atlantic commerce was the primary source of the funds that financed England's naval expansion.³⁹ Individual investors became very wealthy through long-distance distribution and sale of lucrative commodities, and they frequently loaned their considerable fortunes on interest to the English government during wars. Members of Parliament also established a wide variety of Navigation Acts and import and export taxes that generated new revenue streams for the state.⁴⁰ New duties and additional enforcement mechanisms caused the average annual British tax revenue to increase from £3,640,000 in 1689 to £12,154,200 in 1775.⁴¹ More tax revenue meant, in large part, more money for the navy. Government spending on the British navy increased from an annual average of £2.4 million between 1702 and 1713 to £15.2 million between 1793 and 1815.⁴² The navy ate up a significant amount of British tax revenue and debt spending.

Maritime commercial pursuits also provided vessels for the navy. It was common throughout the early modern era for European powers to convert all sorts of privately owned vessels into warships during periods of military mobilization. According to seventeenth-century English observers, for example, Dutch seapower had been built on the foundation of its fisheries.⁴³ It was believed that the French were able to emulate the Dutch model by expanding their own fisheries around Newfoundland. "The whole increase of the naval greatness of France had its foundation from this trade [commercial fishing]," one writer commented in 1745. He continued: "The French by this trade had so far increased their riches and naval power at that time [the turn of the eighteenth century], as to make all Europe stand in fear of them."⁴⁴ For its part, England waged war against the Dutch, built up its fishing industry and navy, fought against the

French, and slowly engrossed the fisheries at Newfoundland.⁴⁵ By the mid-eighteenth century, the author of *The British Merchant* could proclaim: “The history both of France and England will show you that it is since their procuring leave to fish at Newfoundland that they have grown so formidable at sea; that their navy royal has augmented in proportion to the numbers of ships employed in that fishery.”⁴⁶ Much the same could have been said about the relationship between commercial shipping and seapower. Shippers commonly leased their vessels to the English navy during wars despite the fact that this practice became increasingly less common over the course of the eighteenth century.⁴⁷

Maritime vocations even served as nurseries for naval seamen. In the late seventeenth century, Sir Roger L'Estrange observed that one of the prime examples of a “Nursery of Seamen is the Fishery . . . And it is well enough observed, that all Princes and States, are stronger or Weaker, at Sea, according to the Measures of their Fishery.”⁴⁸ In 1722, William Wood similarly stated: “It is a certain maxim that all states are powerful at sea as they flourish in the fishing trade.”⁴⁹ An observer in Boston, Massachusetts, wrote in 1763 that the commercial fishing industry was a “nursery of sailors, by which [Great Britain has] been of late aggrandized, and rendered the arbitress of the world.”⁵⁰ That same year, Massachusetts merchants wrote to their colonial agent, Jasper Mauduit, in London to tell him to lobby Parliament “that if the Fishery here and at Newfoundland should fail, Great Britain will be deprived of a nursery for Seamen, and in a few years will want hands to Navigate her fleets. At the same time the French will have a fine opportunity to Increase their Fishery, to promote the growth of their Colonies, and put their Navy upon a respectable Footing.”⁵¹ Adam Smith equated “the extension of the fisheries of our colonies” with an “increase [in] the shipping and naval power of Great Britain.”⁵² In 1781, Massachusetts fish merchants stated their belief that America’s

future rank among the Nations of the Earth will depend on their Naval Strength; and if they mean to be a commercial people, [then] it behoves them to be able at all times to protect their commerce. The means by which they can procure that protection and naval strength is to give encouragement to that kind of trade among themselves which will best serve as a nursery for seamen. The importance of the Fishery in this view is obvious.⁵³

Commercial fishing trained men to handle wooden sailing vessels, gave them knowledge of trade winds and ocean currents, and familiarized them with life at sea.

Such training made commercial fishing ports ideal labor pools from which to draw manpower for the navy in wartime. Moreover, the fishing industry stimulated growth in shipbuilding and other maritime trades that could support naval power during periods of conflict. Men gained familiarity with life and work at sea. They developed a host of transferable labor skills. When they were mobilized for war, these skills increased the fighting efficiency of warships. As the recorder for the port of Bristol, Sergeant Foster, explained in 1743, the same logic applied to the shipping industry. It was common for the British navy, Foster wrote, to employ “the Mariners bred up in the Merchants’ Service.” “By this means,” he stated, “the Trade of the Nation becomes a Nursery for her Navy; and the Merchant, while he is Increasing the Wealth of the Kingdom, is at the same time training up the Mariner for its Defense.”⁵⁴ Foster understood the symbiosis that existed between commercial growth and naval expansion.

Atlantic seaports further benefited the navy by providing suitable territorial possessions for naval bases. Fortifications and resident populations protected and sustained these bases. The navy constructed its first permanent Atlantic base of operations at Port Royal, Jamaica. The navy alternated between temporary facilities at Kingston, Port Antonio, and Port Royal before making the final determination to construct “a careening wharf, capstan house, storehouses, two brick officers’ houses, and a wall to surround the yard” in Port Royal between roughly 1735 and 1744.⁵⁵ The sugar trade was so lucrative, and the Caribbean was so contentious, that the British navy built a second base at English Harbor, Antigua, at the direct request of Antiguan sugar merchants. These businessmen saw the harbor as a natural hurricane anchorage for warships stationed in the region to protect British commercial interests.⁵⁶ The Admiralty agreed with their assessment and erected facilities at English Harbor between 1739 and 1748.⁵⁷ In the late 1750s, the navy built a North American base of operations at Halifax, Nova Scotia.⁵⁸ These three naval bases emerged out of Britain’s transatlantic commercial expansion. They provided naval seamen with medical care, provisions, and water. The bases further maintained warships by replenishing military stores such as pitch, powder, shot, and tar; replacing damaged masts, rigging, sails, and yards; and cleaning, caulking, and generally repairing the vessels.⁵⁹

In return, naval expansion and the articulation of a blue water policy benefited British Atlantic commerce. A sizeable navy with permanent overseas bases of operation was able to adopt a series of defensive

measures to protect trade from a variety of threats from state and non-state actors. The navy safeguarded overseas business interests whether or not Britain was formally at war with another European power. Convoys defended commercial vessels along various shipping lanes against pirates, enemy warships, and privateers. Guardships secured commercial vessels and seaports along coastlines. Embargoes safeguarded shipping from potential threats. A large navy was also able to go on the offensive against internal and external threats to overseas trade. Pirates were captured, tried, and publicly executed. Business competitors' ships and colonies were assaulted. Coastlines were pacified for commerce. Mutinies and shipborne insurrections were suppressed. The British navy even helped widen business horizons. The navy transported commercial agents on business trips and aided the transoceanic exchange of commercial information. The navy forced open additional markets and secured access to fresh resources, which enabled trade to flow in extra directions. These state-sponsored activities nurtured and sustained economic development in the Atlantic World.

Convoys were state-organized groups of commercial vessels that sailed with military escorts, usually during wars. The number of vessels being escorted could be substantial. In 1703, London importers observed that the navy convoyed "about 100 sail of the greatest and richest ships" on a transatlantic passage between the West Indies and England.⁶⁰ England first organized convoys for short hauls in the fourteenth century, largely for protection from Scottish predators. England began regularly convoying overseas Atlantic trade only after 1651.⁶¹

The extent to which naval convoys benefited Atlantic commerce has recently been called into question. It has been argued that convoys were mostly a hassle for merchants. Commercial vessels had to meet at a certain time and place to enter convoys. They had to wait for convoys to set sail. They had to travel at a snail's pace to overseas destinations so as not to become separated. Those destinations were not always near intended markets. Moreover, convoys were not effective all of the time. For these reasons, we are told, most shippers crossed the ocean without naval aid.⁶²

Why, then, did a wide variety of merchants apply to the Board of Trade and the Admiralty for naval convoys throughout the entire eighteenth century? Regardless of the hassles and the imperfections associated with convoys, they did provide a deterrent against pirates and enemy privateers and warships. Groups of warships also traveled with commercial vessels to provide support in storms and shipwrecks. Convoys reduced maritime