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Julian Stafford Corbett

Excerpt

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NAVAL ESSAYS

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HISTORIANS AND NAVAL HISTORY ¹

BY SIR JOHN K. LAUGHTON

THE Navy has had such an important influence on the development of England's national life that it may well cause some surprise to find that our people in general know so little of our Naval History, and still more, perhaps, to find that as a rule, until within the last forty or fifty years, our historians paid little attention to it. The notices they give of naval movements are quite perfunctory, relate only to those which come more distinctly into open view, and are chiefly remarkable for extreme misapprehension. I am not referring merely to the ordinary textbooks, though—as far as they are concerned—England might be in the geographical position of Bohemia, and it is from them that our young people get their first, and, in too many cases, also their last impressions. In their way, the greater historians are almost equally bad. The least so, in this respect, is Lord Stanhope (Mahon), who in his *History of the Eighteenth Century*—a period more than usually important in our naval history—does mention the chief patent facts, and, by

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avoiding details, avoids also gross blunders. But he had no knowledge of facts that were not patent. He did not know, for instance, the very important share that the Navy had in the failure of the Rebellion of 1745; and when he does go into detail, as in his account of the relief of Barcelona in 1706, he blunders egregiously, by trusting to a spurious journal, into the authenticity of which he had not examined.

Of all earlier writers, Macaulay is perhaps the worst, for detail was Macaulay's speciality. This leads him often into error, and when he talks of naval affairs, he is perhaps more than usually incongruous and inaccurate. I have no doubt that his intentions were good, but his performance was very bad. And the scale of his naval notices, no less than their matter, seems to show that he but lightly esteemed them in comparison with the weighty affairs of *terra firma*. He allots, for instance, four pages to the account of the battle of La Hogue—"the first great victory," he says, "that the English had gained over the French since the day of Agincourt"; a victory which Ranke has spoken of as giving the command of the sea to the English. Whether either of these is a true estimate, I do not stop to inquire; the point I wish to make is, that with an inordinate amount of irrelevant and quite unauthenticated padding, he tells the story in four pages, of which something like every other line

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contains a grotesque blunder ; but to Steinkirk, a battle more Dutch than English, and now perhaps best known by the necktie that was named from it, he devotes six pages ; and to Landen, also a Dutch battle and known to modern readers mainly by Macaulay's own magnificent narrative—into the entire accuracy of which I am not called on to examine—he gives nine ; and this, though neither of them affected in any important degree the course or the result of the war. They only happened to be fought on land.

In other passages where he refers to naval transactions, he seems to be guided either by spite and political prejudice, or by pamphleteers who wrote under similar guidance. People are apt to think that they do know something of the naval history of this particular war,¹ because Macaulay had the supreme art of making himself read. They really know very little about it, because in their study of it they are following a blind leader of the blind.

If, in other periods of our history, other historians have made fewer blunders, it is that they have tried to avoid speaking of naval affairs at all. When they have not been able to do that, they have spoken of the Navy as a mere engine for fighting battles and sometimes for winning victories, glorious, but of no great consequence. Of the more certain and unceasing work of the

¹ War of the League of Augsburg, 1689-1697.

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Navy, the constant, grinding pressure which it brings on our enemies, few really understand anything. Only a few years ago, the Council of the Naval Exhibition at Chelsea (1891), a Council, largely consisting of naval officers of high rank, decided that they could not put forward prominently the preamble of the old Act of Parliament, commonly known as the Articles of War, because it would seem a piece of vulgar braggadocio. The words objected to were that it is the Navy “on which, under the Good Providence of God, the wealth, safety and strength of the kingdom chiefly depend.” This Council, that is to say, had no understanding of any work of the Navy except its fighting battles; no real understanding of the work which many of them had spent their lives in doing; no understanding of the work done by the Navy during the ten years of the Napoleonic War after Trafalgar, when there were no battles at all.

And so, only to an exaggerated extent, it is with modern readers over the whole course of our history; where there are no battles, there is no naval history. A modern writer, happily still living, has said that when England entered on the War of the Spanish Succession, she was A naval power; when she emerged from it, she was THE naval power. Does the ordinary reader ask himself how this was? He reads of only one battle and that not a decisive victory; he reads

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—if he has an inquiring mind—of many skirmishes and several single-ship fights, in which victory did not always fall to the English; he reads that the French were capturing our merchant ships and even our men-of-war, on our own coasts, as a whale captures herrings. At no time have the achievements of French ships shone with greater *éclat*. It was the age of Cassard, of Forbin, of Du Guay Trouin—names which may be placed in juxtaposition with the most brilliant in English history; men over whom our ships and fleets won no advantage. And yet, *Respice finem!* At the end of the war, England was THE naval power. Is it braggadocio to say that? Fortunately for us, it was a foreigner—a student¹ of naval history in its widest sense—who made the statement. It remains for our historians to explain it.

Again, it is, I think, familiarly known that in the Civil War of the seventeenth century, the Navy adhered to the Parliament, but as no battles were fought, the advantage to the Parliament was believed to be trifling, if not negligible. It was left for Dr Gardiner, after more than two hundred years, to show that it was really the determining factor of the struggle; but even Gardiner did not consider it necessary to examine why the Navy took the Parliamentary side. Still less has any historian thought it necessary to dwell on the Navy as, to a considerable extent,

¹ Admiral Mahan, U.S.N.

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a cause of the triumph of the Yorkists in the Wars of the Roses ; or, going back to still earlier days, of the triumph of the Barons over Henry III.

The fact is that, till quite recently, historians have considered naval history as outside their purview ; separated from political history, from ecclesiastical, social, industrial, commercial, even military history, as by a series of watertight bulk-heads ; having no earthly connection with them and only to be spoken of when a dramatic situation—Hawke, for instance, at Quiberon Bay, Nelson at Copenhagen—promised to be effective. They have, therefore, not studied the general action of the Navy and have known nothing of it. They have left everything relating to naval affairs to a class of writers who have been spoken of as “ Naval Historians ”—sometimes, it would almost seem, in analogy with the name of the Guinea-Pig.¹

The early chroniclers knew no such division of labour ; they wrote what they saw, what they heard and what they imagined ; and about naval affairs with the same freedom and the same ignorance as about everything else. The scraps relating to naval history have to be picked out piecemeal and put together as the student best can. The absurdities have to be passed over, or explained away when they are too palpable. One

¹ There are possibly some people who do not know that the little animal is so called because he is not a pig, and does not come from Guinea.

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that has always struck me as peculiarly delightful, as illustrating the chroniclers' refusal to be restrained by the trammels of natural science—astronomy say, and geography—is Froissart's statement that at Sluys, the English worked or rowed to the north-east all the forenoon, so that they might charge down on the French line with the advantage of the sun. We accept the statement that the English did make the reported movement; it was a thing that could be seen, and no doubt was seen by thousands; but to suppose that they made it in order that they might have the sun in the faces of their fighting men as they charged to the south, is to suppose them imbecile. Why they made it may well be a subject for discussion; but whatever the advantage they sought, they paid a heavy price for it.

It was not till the seventeenth century that men began writing on naval history as a thing apart, and then very much as chroniclers of their own experiences. Such, at least, is Sir William Monson, who seems to have always kept in view the idea that his first duty was to represent his own conduct in the most favourable light. His writings are useful, suggestive, and often amusing; but in reading them it is necessary to keep in mind that the notes from which he wrote were very defective, his memory imperfect, and his bias pronounced. After him I must refer to

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John Evelyn, a man who was, in civil affairs, frequently connected with the Navy, and an intimate associate of Samuel Pepys. He is said to have written a history of the Second Dutch War, and to have sent his manuscript to Pepys for amendment or criticism; between the two the MS. was lost, and—less fortunate than Carlyle's *French Revolution*—was not rewritten. If the story is true, it is possible that the MS. may yet be found; but there is absolutely no evidence that it was ever written, and I, myself, am disposed to think that it was not. That Evelyn had the intention of writing it, I know. Some time since, while doing some work in the Record Office, I came, quite by accident, on a sheet with the well-known signature of J. E., endorsed—"Queries for Mr Williamson; to be communicated to my Lord Arlington."¹ The queries, though unanswered, are themselves very interesting, and seem to show more than the average seventeenth-century writer's estimate of a historian's duty, *e.g.* :—

1. The rise of the quarrel and how to justify C. Holmes' action at Guinea?

7. The Dutch action at Sheerness and Chatham and upon whom the miscarriage and our losses are to be charged?

8. Concerning the treaty, by whom first sought?

¹ F. O. Holland, ccliv. 290.

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HISTORIANS AND NAVAL HISTORY II

How managed? Why Breda was preferred to London?

And as additional :—

1. What is to be said of the French King's declaring for the Hollander, and his pronouncing US the aggressors?

5. The action at Bergen and Negotiation with the King of Denmark.

7. Why the fleet was divided and by whose advice—to vindicate my Lord Arlington in point of intelligence?

9. Why His Majesty parted with Dunkirk to the French, so near the rupture with the Hollander?

We can, I am afraid, quite well understand why there are no answers to these questions; and we may wonder what use Evelyn would have made of the answers, true or false, if he had got any; but that he felt the historian's curiosity on the several points he raised must stand to his credit.

It would seem that Josiah Burchett ought to be classed as a "Naval Historian," for his book—a folio of near 800 pages—bears the high-sounding title: *A complete History of the most remarkable Transactions at Sea, from the earliest accounts of time to the conclusion of the last*