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Charles Rathbone Low
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The History of the Indian Navy (1613–1863)

Charles Rathbone Low (1837–1918) was a lieutenant in the Indian Navy and author of popular books on military history and nautical exploration, including *Soldiers of the Victorian Age* and *Maritime Discovery*. This two-volume work, first published in 1877, comprehensively covers the history of the British Indian Navy, from its origins as the Bombay Marine to its abolition in 1863. It is an exceptionally detailed historical source, containing indexes of the ships and officers of the Indian Navy, and as such, it is a work of great importance to those interested in the history of the Indian Navy or the people that came into contact with it. Volume 1 begins with the early voyages of the East India Company's ships and includes a chapter on the relationship between the Bombay Marine and the Joasmi pirates. It concludes with the Bombay Marine becoming the Indian Navy in 1830.

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VOLUME 1

CHARLES RATHBONE LOW



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

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

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108045001

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2012

This edition first published 1877

This digitally printed version 2012

ISBN 978-1-108-04500-1 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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HISTORY
OF
THE INDIAN NAVY.
(1613—1863).

BY
CHARLES RATHBONE LOW,
LIEUTENANT (LATE) INDIAN NAVY,
Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

AUTHOR OF
“THE LIFE OF F.M. SIR GEORGE POLLOCK, BART., G.C.B., G.C.S.I.”
“TALES OF OLD OCEAN,” “THE LAND OF THE SUN,” &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
NEW BURLINGTON STREET.
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty.
1877.

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LONDON :

Printed by A. Schulze, 13, Poland Street.

Cambridge University Press

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(BY SPECIAL PERMISSION, GRACIOUSLY ACCORDED)

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His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales,

TO WHOM ARE RESPECTFULLY TENDERED,

ON BEHALF OF HIS BROTHER OFFICERS,

WHO HIGHLY APPRECIATE THE HONOUR PAID TO THEIR

OLD AND DISTINGUISHED SERVICE,

THE GRATEFUL THANKS OF HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS'S

HUMBLE AND OBEDIENT SERVANT,

THE AUTHOR.

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P R E F A C E.

MACAULAY, speaking of the indifference of the English public to Indian affairs, wrote that “a disturbance amidst the Spitalfields’ weavers excited more attention in the Senate than the legislating for one hundred millions of its native subjects.” But though the Indian Budget, annually brought before the House of Commons, excites a more languid interest among our legislators than a debate on a “breach of privilege,” or a “personal explanation,” yet the degree of interest this country attaches to Indian subjects has greatly increased since the time of the great Essayist. Hence I venture to hope that the records of a Service, which has been abolished and consigned to oblivion, may interest the British public sufficiently to be my apology for laying the story of its eventful career before the world.

Historical works have been written detailing the services of the Army in every Indian War of importance, generally by military writers of repute, as Wilkie, Thorn, Snodgrass, Kaye, and others, while naval historians, like James and Marshall, have narrated the deeds of the British Navy in Eastern waters; but, between the two, the Indian Navy has been forgotten, and accounts have actually been written of such events as the capture of Mauritius, and the Java War, in which

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no mention appears even of the presence of a squadron of ships of the Service, while the official reports make the barest reference to them. It is, therefore, a weighty, no less than a pleasing, task, that of doing justice to the dead, and to the survivors of a Service which, though uniformly treated with neglect and contumely, took a noble revenge by ever doing its duty.

It will be understood that, in confining myself in these pages to recording the services of the Indian Navy in the wars and other hostile operations in which they participated, I do not claim for the Service, by reason of this prominence, a preponderating share in the successes achieved.

I would point out that, irrespective of whatever interest may attach to this work as an Historical Record of the Indian Navy, many episodes of our conquest of India and the consolidation of our rule in our Eastern Empire, are, for the first time, disinterred from musty records and despatches, and brought before the public in the form of a connected narrative. Of such a nature are many passages in the early history of the Service, such as the operations against the Joasmi pirates and, generally, in the Persian Gulf, against the Beni-Boo-Ali Arabs, in the Eastern Islands preceding, and during, our occupation of Java, at the capture of Kurrachee and Aden, and the repulse of the repeated attacks of the Arabs in their desperate attempts to recapture that stronghold; also the part played by the Service in the First China War, in New Zealand, at the siege of Mooltan, in the First and Second Burmese Wars, the Persian War, the occupation of Perim and the Andaman Islands, and, finally, the services of the Indian Naval Brigades during the Sepoy Mutiny, which have been quietly ignored by all historians and

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other authorities. If I have made public some of these events and shed new light on others, this work will not be without some value in the opinion of those to whom the services of the Indian Navy, *per se*, are of small moment. A point to which also I have devoted special attention is the surveys made by the Service. Mr. Clements Markham has written an admirable and succinct sketch of the hydrographical labours of the Indian Navy, in his “Memoir on Indian Surveys,” but, in the succeeding pages, I have given a detailed account of each Survey, including the names of the officers engaged, from the time of Lieutenant McCluer, in the year 1773, to the date of the abolition of the Service.

The Indian Navy ceased to exist in 1863, but, though a period of fourteen years has elapsed since its extinction, not even the briefest sketch of its services has been given to the world. Mr. Clements Markham, in his work above mentioned, expresses an opinion that some officer of the Indian Navy “should gather together the recollections of his colleagues, and, with the aid of such fragments as have survived the general destruction, give to the world a history of the work done by the Indian Navy in war and during peace.” Agreeing as I do with that accomplished geographer, I could have wished that some senior, and more competent, officer of the Service, had undertaken the task of writing a connected History of the Indian Navy, but as so many years have elapsed since the fatal day when our flag was hauled down in Bombay Harbour, and no person, qualified by familiarity with India, and imbued with the traditions of the Service, has come forward to accomplish the arduous, but honourable, duty, I reluctantly consented to undertake the work. It was at the annual Indian Navy

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dinner, held in June, 1875, that the proposal was made to me, and, at first, I shrank from the task; but, encouraged by offers of assistance from the late Commander Heathcote, I.N., and other friends, I, as I have said, consented, with some diffidence, and many misgivings as to my ability, to prepare this record of the history of a Service in which were passed some of the best years of my life.

In writing of places so familiar to my brother officers, I have adopted the orthography in vogue before the abolition of the Service, ere the Hunterian system vexed the unlearned soul; not that I would, for a moment, seek to controvert the theories of its advocates, that the latter is an adaptation of an old system and may be more strictly correct. Far be it from me to discuss the knotty subject, upon which doctors “have agreed to differ;” I am content, with a due sense of humility at the confession, to class myself with the unlearned aforesaid.

The arrangement of the work is, as far as practicable, consecutive as to dates, but where distinct episodes, stretching over a period of years, require separate treatment, a chapter is devoted to the subject. This course is followed in such instances as the narrative of the dealings of the Service with the Joasmi pirates, and the records of the Surveys, events which, being of an episodic character, and ranging over a period of years, are more intelligible to the reader when thus treated. This explanation may be considered necessary to account for the absence of sequence as regards dates in the headings of the chapters.

Almost without exception, the entire body of surviving officers of the Service have responded to my appeal, and placed at my disposal details of their own services and such other information as they might

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possess, and I here tender to them all,—from the senior officer, Captain Boyce,* a name honoured in the Service, as the following annals will show,—my hearty thanks for their co-operation.

But the difficulties that stand in the way of compiling a reliable and connected History of the Indian Navy, are of no common order, and this chiefly through an act of Vandalism more worthy of the days when the Alexandrian library was committed to the flames, than of the present century,—though, perhaps, we do the ancients scant justice when we instance this memorable deed as peculiarly typical of that age, for there are men still living who can recall the destruction by fire of the Public Library at Washington, when our troops entered that city in 1814. The act of Vandalism, mentioned above, was the destruction of the public records of the Indian Navy, and is thus referred to by Mr. Markham :—“Before the Indian Navy had become a thing of the past, there was a destruction of the materials for its history. Previous to 1860 there were many and most valuable records of that Service in the India Office, but in that year nearly all were reduced to pulp.” Again he writes :—“The official records of the Bombay Marine and Indian Navy have been almost entirely destroyed. Its history can now only be traced in fragmentary memoirs, papers, and reports.”

Horace has said :—“*Vixere fortes ante Agamemnona multi;*” but, as the bard adds, these heroes have gone down to oblivion, “*caerent quia vate sacro.*” It is to rescue the names, “unhonoured and unsung,” of

* This gallant veteran, who entered the Service so far back as the year 1802, and lost his legs in the memorable action fought on the 30th of June, 1815, between his brig, the ‘Nautilus,’ and the United States ship ‘Peacock,’ still survives, and wrote to me in excellent health and spirits on the 9th of April, 1877.

forgotten worthies of a Service consigned to obscurity by those formerly in power at the India Office, with studied intent, as would appear by the extracts from Markham's work, that I take up the pen.

The sphere of duty of the Indian Navy was remote, the operations, oftentimes, insignificant, and the results of small import to the destinies of the world. Though these reasons may, perhaps, militate against this record being received with interest by the countrymen of the gallant seamen whose achievements it registers, I would submit that this should not be so. It is both more glorious and less exacting on one's sense of duty, to participate in some great European conflict, with such incentives as "all the world" for spectators, the applause of an admiring people, and a grateful sovereign ready to shower rewards on the victors, than to serve through a "little war," such as many we shall detail, the very name of which is forgotten, a war waged in an obscure inland sea or gulf, in a deadly climate, against a bloodthirsty foe who gives no quarter, and with the depressing knowledge that success brings no honours to the survivors who, too often, carry away with them the seeds of disease and premature death. By its works, now for the first time made public, let the Indian Navy be judged at the bar of History, and let the stern arbiter decide whether it failed in its mission in those distant Eastern Seas during the two and a half centuries of its existence, or whether it has acted a part worthy the country of its birth.

If the people of these isles, and the world in general, are agreed in extolling one achievement of our race as pre-eminently greater than any other, without doubt that achievement is the acquisition of our magnificent Eastern Empire. It is an episode of the first magnitude

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in the history of the human race, for it has exerted a great and an abiding influence, not only on the two hundred and thirty millions of souls in Hindostan, but on the teeming population of China, with which its conquest has mainly brought us into contact, and of Asia generally. That we are now a first-rate Asiatic, as well as European, Power, is due to our Indian Empire, and my readers will, I trust, concede, after perusing this work, that the Service, whose history it records, had no inconsiderable share in acquiring this glorious inheritance, and achieving this renown for our beloved country.

Any one now visiting the Red Sea, the East Coast of Africa, and the Persian Gulf, would fail to realise the fact that, up to within the latter half of this century, the British flag was seldom seen in these waters, except from the peak of the cruisers of the Indian Navy. The steamers of the Peninsular and Oriental Company—the pioneer of which, the ‘Hindostan,’ was commanded by Captain Moresby, I.N.—were the first to break the spell in the Red Sea, then the telegraph lines were laid, and, lastly, the construction of the Suez Canal made it the highway to all the Eastern world, and led to the establishment of lines of steamers from Aden and the Cape to Zanzibar. Officers of the Service, to whom the Persian Gulf was familiar ground, can remember how, not more than twenty years ago, the only postal communication the squadron had with the outer world, was when a ship-of-war arrived from Bombay to relieve another, or a steam-frigate was despatched on a special service. A British merchantman was seldom seen, and a steamer never, in this inland sea, which bore a bad name as the haunt of pirates from time immemorial, and by reason of the intricate navigation of the Arabian littoral; but, since the establish-

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ment of the telegraph, in 1864, regular lines of steamers, between Bombay and Bushire and Bussorah, and London and these ports, *viâ* the Suez Canal, have sprung into existence, and the Persian Gulf is no more a *mare incognita* than the Red Sea and the East Coast of Africa. The romance has long departed from all these places, and the Nile and Bagdad have become well nigh as vulgarised by the inroad of excursionists as the Rhine or Venice.

But service in these inland waters a quarter of a century ago, meant expatriation, and letters from friends in England were usually nine months old. Hence it was, perhaps, that echoes of the doings of the Indian Navy, in their encounters with the warlike maritime Arab tribes of the Persian Gulf, and with the truculent races of the African coast and Red Sea, were long in reaching Bombay, and died away before they fell upon English ears.

As the historian of the Indian Navy, I have received many letters from officers of the highest rank and distinction, who have served with us, testifying to the efficiency of the Service and ability of the officers, but the exigencies of space and the patience of my readers forbid a reference to them. I feel, however, I shall encroach neither on the one nor the other, by extracting the following generous panegyric from a letter addressed to me, under date the 18th of April, 1877, by Vice-Admiral Sir F. Beauchamp Seymour, K.C.B., Commanding the Channel Squadron, an officer deservedly held in high esteem in the noble Service he adorns:—

“No person regretted more than I did the abolition of that gallant Service. In my opinion no greater mistake was ever made. It was a Service which ranked among its officers some of the finest and best

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fellows I have ever met during a career of over forty-three years, and during its existence I ever endeavoured to show to the officers of it my appreciation of its merits wherever we met. Campbell, Rennie, Lynch, and many others, will always be remembered by me. From many of them I have received great hospitality and kindness, while their knowledge of Eastern languages, and of the countries in which they served so continuously, countries never or rarely visited at that time by my brother officers, was of the greatest possible service to us all."

One other extract I shall make from a letter, dated the 14th of March, 1877, from Sir James D. H. Elphinstone, Bart., M.P., one of the Lords of the Treasury in the present Government:—

"I have taken the greatest interest in a Service which I had no hesitation in stating in my place in the House of Commons, had in a short time produced more men of varied ability as diplomatists, surveyors, navigators, and explorers, than any Service of similar dimensions in the world, and I could only wonder at the fatuity of a Government in breaking up such an establishment, a proceeding not only foolish in itself, but which has been attended by expensive and disastrous consequences, as I distinctly prognosticated."

Though the records of the Indian Navy do not show a roll of great actions won by fleets in line of battle, the Service was seldom at peace, and displayed the traditional heroism of British seamen in ship duels, boat actions, and other unpretentious affairs, in which species of combat courage and devotion have ever found their most remarkable opportunities for display, as is evidenced in the history of the Royal Navy. The Company's ships have, in olden times, been engaged in sanguinary conflict with Portuguese, Dutch,

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and French ships-of-war, and with the pirate fleets of Arabs, Sanganians, Coolies, and Malwans. In such actions, in the capture by bombardment, or storm, of strong forts—as Ormuz, Surat, Tannah, Severndroog, Gheriah, and Mocha, and in good service rendered ashore and afloat in Burmah, China, New Zealand, Persia, and India—the honour of the Indian Navy as a war marine has been vindicated, while, as the nursery of an unsurpassed band of scientific marine surveyors, its services to commerce and civilisation have been universally acknowledged. I therefore appeal with confidence to the verdict of History as to the conduct and career of the Service, judged from these public records, and, if the task has been inadequately discharged, the blame must be equally divided between my shortcomings as a narrator, and the paucity and want of continuity of the available materials.

And here I would thank the Secretary of State for India, the Marquis of Salisbury, for having permitted me to consult such records of the Service as still remain. I have also had access to detached MS. notes collected by the late Commodore Brucks, I.N., who designed to write a history of the Indian Navy; while, I may observe, that personally I was familiar with the subject, having from time to time during the past ten years, treated of episodes of the Service in magazine articles. That portion of my materials derived from published sources, was acquired in the libraries of the British Museum, Royal Geographical Society, Royal United Service Institution, and India Office, the two latter, owing to the courtesy of the librarians, being of special value. Lastly, I have received the cordial assistance of brother officers, and relatives of those deceased, who have placed at my

disposal a vast amount of matter, including journals and correspondence, official and private.

The majority of English readers, in speaking of the victories achieved by British arms in India, regard Clive as if he was the first to cause the name and flag of England to be respected in that country; but though, in the marvellous story of the founding and building up of the magnificent fabric of Eastern Empire, the name of the hero of Plassy shines conspicuous as, perhaps, the greatest Englishman of his time, and the master-mason, under whose inspiring genius the work gave promise of assuming its present imperial proportions,—yet even in those far-distant times when the East India Company was a feeble commercial corporation, struggling against the competition of the Dutch and Portuguese, there were gallant seamen in their service, as Best and Downton, who upheld the honour of this country, and testified to their European and Asiatic enemies that they were not degenerate descendants of the race from which had sprung Raleigh and Drake. In those early days, when the Company contended for very existence with rival associations and hostile nationalities, they found in their Marine the only champion to fight their battles. Those forgotten worthies did “yeoman’s service” for their honourable masters, and now that the Indian Navy, which was the last titular transformation undergone by the original Service, no longer exists, it is only just that, equally with their military brethren, they should receive the meed of credit which is their due; for, as a writer says of them, “in their early struggles with the Moguls and Mahrattas, the Dutch and Portuguese, they displayed an energy, perseverance, and courage, as indomitable as that which subsequently conquered at Plassy and Assaye—albeit

they have not been so fortunate as to be praised by a brilliant essayist.”

This, therefore, has been my self-imposed task, and though, in literary style and defective treatment of the theme, I may halt at an immeasurable distance behind the great masters who have written on cognate Indian subjects, at least it has been my endeavour, in treating of events and of the actions of men, to

“Speak of them as they are;
“Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice.”

Personally I have no interests to serve, no grievance to air; the furtherance of truth and justice has been my only object, and I venture to affirm that this plain speaking is the wisest course in the interests of the Service, notwithstanding the averment of Bacon, that “a mixture of a lie, doth ever add pleasure.”

C. R. LOW.

Chelsea, November, 1877.

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* Widow of an Officer of the Indian Navy.

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