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Admiral and Sir Herbert Richmond, K. C. B.
Excerpt
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Naval History and the Citizen



A LITTLE OVER A QUARTER OF A CENTURY ago, Professor Pollard remarked that “Even within the limits of English History there are certain subjects which pre-eminently demand our attention; and foremost amongst these, I place Naval History”. The existence of our Empire, he went on to say, built up as that Empire has been, and resting as it does, upon sea power, must depend upon the true interpretation and appreciation of the lessons of Naval History.¹

For whom is this “true interpretation and appreciation” necessary? Surely, it is for those in whose hands the destiny of this Empire lies. Those hands are the hands of the citizen. He is the statesman who directs and controls policy in peace and war, the Member of Parliament who discusses it, the

¹ A. F. Pollard, *Factors in Modern History*, p. 247 (1907).

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Press which criticizes and puts forward the editorial opinion, and the man-in-the-street who reads, and hears, and makes his own contribution to the discussions, and, ultimately, is the deciding authority as to what the strength shall be of that sea power upon which the existence of the Empire rests.

I think I shall not exaggerate if I say that the citizens of the Empire have but little real knowledge of the workings of sea power. They may feel instinctively, or because they have been told, that “the sea is all in all” to them, but it is impossible to read either the discussions in Parliament, or the correspondence which takes place in the Press, without seeing how little their beliefs are rooted in the soil of the records of experience. So we see far-reaching proposals frequently put forward, and decisions of the greatest moment made, which either ignore or contradict, even falsify or travesty, the teachings of naval history; and I have no hesitation in saying that we have in recent years been exposed to some grave perils in conse-

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quence of this almost universal ignorance, both in and out of Parliament, of this branch of the General History of the country and Empire.

Let me illustrate what I have in my mind by some—a few only—examples. The question of “blockade” is one. We see the assertion made that “the great weapon” which this country has always used in war is blockade; with the inference that the national strategy employed by our statesmen in the wars of the past has always been to reduce, or assist to reduce, our enemies by a blockade of the enemy nation; to create an investment of the country analogous to the siege of a fortress, by which, through the cutting off, by that measure called “blockade”, of all external supplies, such pressure has been brought to bear upon our enemies, either singly or in conjunction with our armies, as to induce a need or a desire for peace.

How far is that assertion supported by the evidence of history? On what occasions

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has this country established, or attempted to establish, a blockade of the enemy nation? In the three hard-fought wars with the Dutch we did not blockade their country. We fought their fleets in the great struggle of 1652–4, and when those fleets were defeated their commerce, deprived of its protection, ceased to sail, and the blow was vital, for the United Provinces depended for their existence upon trade and fishing. But this was not “blockade”, nor was a blockade ever declared.

The Tory policy in the wars against Louis XIV was one of using our strength at sea against the enemy’s colonies and commerce, thereby depriving France of its sources of revenue; but again, there was no blockade though great efforts were made to prevent food-stuffs reaching the country. When Alberoni, in 1718, attempted to seize Sicily, we did not try to force him to desist from this act by a blockade of Spain. A Spanish fleet, upon which the communications of the Spanish army in Sicily de-

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pended, was destroyed at Passaro, and our naval power was then employed to support the troops of our Austrian ally in Sicily in ejecting the invaders. When we quarrelled with Spain in 1739 over a matter of the immunity of our traders, engaged only too often in shady transactions, we did not proceed at once to impose a blockade upon Spain. Our strategical effort consisted in the despatch of an expedition whose object it was to deprive Spain of what Walpole called some “place of consequence”—Havana or Carthagena—thereby to induce her, by the loss of revenue she would suffer from the capture, to accede to our claims for compensation and for “No search”. We did indeed send squadrons off Cadiz, Barcelona and Ferrol, but this was with the definite purpose of preventing the Spanish squadrons from falling on our expedition in the Caribbean, attacking our trade, or sending armies either to invade England or capture our naval bases, Gibraltar and Minorca.

When the European war of the Austrian

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Succession was superposed upon the Anglo-Spanish in 1740–1 we still did not establish a “blockade of Spain”. We assisted the armies of Maria Theresa and Charles Emanuel in Italy by preventing the Spanish armies from using the easy and economical route by sea into Italy, obliging them instead to make their way by either the difficult Alpine roads or those along the coast which could be dominated by the guns of the fleet. In the final stage, when France and ourselves became “principals” in the war, we did not try to blockade France. We had indeed to struggle hard for our own security; to guard ourselves against invasion, to protect our trade, to prevent French help reaching the Jacobites in Scotland or Yorkshire during the ’45, or French expeditions from injuring and capturing our possessions and settlements in the Northern Colonies and in India. The dispositions of our fleet aimed it at the enemy fleets. The British squadrons were so placed that the enemy squadrons were either confined to

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harbour by superior force or brought to battle with advantage if they put to sea; and the result of this was that the French commercial flag disappeared from the sea for want of protection from its fighting brother. But neutral traders continued to ply and to carry the goods the enemy required. The Dutchman, the Lubecker, the Dane and the Hamburger conducted the sea-commerce of the enemy. This is not “blockade”. Restriction of enemy’s commercial shipping it was, but it neither constituted a siege of the country, nor fulfilled those objects which a blockade fulfils.

When our interests and those of France came into collision in the Ohio Valley in 1755 what did we do? We did not “blockade France”. We sent an army across the sea under the protection of the Navy to assist our colonists, and the Navy prevented French armies from reinforcing their armies in Canada; fulfilling thereby that first and most elementary principle of all strategy of concentrating superior force in the spot we

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regarded as decisive—Canada. Cruising to the westward, our squadrons covered, like a great umbrella, the line of passage across the Atlantic. As before, the result of this was that French shipping could not sail to or from those ports whose approaches were in the occupation of the British squadrons. But elsewhere it sailed. Trade sailed almost freely in the Mediterranean, and as before the neutral carried the enemy trade freely except in such goods as were classed as contraband or under such restrictions as were imposed by the Rule of War of 1756, that measure which was to be extended, with such far reaching results, into the doctrine of continuous voyage as applied by the Northerners in the Civil War of a century later. There is a fund of naval history in that single measure.

When the English in England quarrelled with their fellow subjects in the North American colonies, blockade was not the weapon we employed to enforce our policy. Such interruption of the Colonists' com-

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merce as there was, was in the form of an embargo on the colonial trade—an embargo denounced by Burke as an outrage. Blockade was indeed suggested. Possibly, but possibly only, it might have been effective, but it was not the great weapon that we employed. We endeavoured to subdue the resistance of the colonists by the use of military force on land. When, in the subsequent years of 1778, 1779 and 1780, France, Spain and Holland successively ranged themselves against us, we neither blockaded nor tried to blockade any one of them. We struck at French interests, and protected our own, in the West Indies. We defended ourselves in India against the immortal Suffren. Against Spain, we had to struggle to hold Gibraltar, and eventually struck her a grievous blow not by blockade, but by the capture of Havana. We deprived Dutch shipping of its protection by defeating their fleet in the North Sea, with the familiar result that her commerce ceased to sail, with the natural effect upon a people whose

livelihood depended upon the sea. But this, again, was not the “weapon of blockade”. We gave support to Frederick of Prussia to enable him to maintain his struggle, which, for us, was purely a diversion, for so long as France chose to make efforts on land, she could not devote resources to the sea sufficient to regain Canada.

The great war with France tells a similar tale. If a generalization may be made by which to express the higher British strategy of the first phase of that long and varied period, it might be that our aim was to keep the armies of the successive coalitions in the field: and that we did this by furnishing them with the money they needed. Such money could only be derived from trade and therefore our trade must not only continue, it must also increase to enable us to give the needed financial help. If it were to increase it must be secure, and security could only come from the destruction of the fleets and squadrons of the enemy and from depriving those fleets of the positions from