

NAVAL HISTORY AND NATIONAL HISTORY

ONE of the chief tendencies of contemporary thought is towards specialization; and in no subject is this trend more marked than in history. As a result of the immense expansion of our knowledge of the past, and also of a laudable desire for thoroughness, historical studies have become divided into compartments, labelled ancient or modern, political or diplomatic, economic or social, ecclesiastical or archaeological, constitutional or legal, naval or military. Even these divisions are subdivided chronologically; and greatly daring is the student who ventures to delve deep into any one of these subjects for more than a century or two. This concentration of effort has manifest advantages as tending to promote accuracy and thoroughness; but it tends to become microscopic, and, if it be too meticulously pursued, produces narrowness of vision. A man who is

perpetually engaged on a small portion of a subject loses the power of illustrating it from cognate studies; and the resulting limitation of outlook has prompted the remark of a cynic, that nothing in the world is so insufferably dull as a conversazione of specialists.

I have been led to these thoughts because the defects of over specializing have sometimes been conspicuous in naval histories, especially in those of a former age. Written generally with the purpose of describing a particular war or even a campaign, they attained their immediate object, but failed to achieve a wider success, that of arousing a general interest in their subject. If we ask why the earlier writers, and perhaps some of the later writers on naval history, failed to attract, the answer will be that they failed to connect their subject with the wider life of the age. As a rule they explained only briefly and perfunctorily why the war occurred, and they did not show how it stood in regard to previous conflicts, what principle was at stake, or how the course of world-history was affected.

The best instance of this limited outlook is the work of William James, “The Naval History of Great Britain,” from the year 1793 to the Battle of Navarino in 1827. The six volumes of James’s history offer a signal example of industry and perseverance. He consulted the logs of the ships which he named, and, when possible, interviewed their officers. Therefore the *Edinburgh Review* declared that his work “approaches as nearly to perfection in its own line, as any historical work ever did.” This praise is deserved, if stress be laid on the words “in its own line.” But readers of James soon become aware that that line was narrow. He follows almost exclusively the movements of fleets and ships. His volumes contain an enormous mass of details, generally very correctly and clearly set forth; but the details are united by no general plan. In short James gives us tactics without strategy, and he describes single engagements, while neglecting to take a survey of the war as a whole.

For example, at the commencement of his work, he traces briefly the growth of

the chief classes of ships of the Royal Navy, and then plunges the reader into the French Revolutionary War of 1793, without presenting any account of its cause except that the French beheaded their king, whereupon we ordered the French ambassador to leave these shores. This neglect is the more singular because the real cause of war was to some extent naval; for the French were seriously menacing the independence of our Ally, the Dutch Republic, whose ports, ships and money they meant to seize; and if they established themselves in the estuaries of the Scheldt and Rhine, they could threaten the weakest side of the British Isles, the long, exposed and easily accessible east coast. A wider outlook would have enabled James from the outset to invest his subject with general interest by revealing the relation of the war of 1793–1801 to earlier conflicts; but that wider outlook was not his. Instead of noting the large issues of the time, James plunged into details concerning the hostile fleets and their movements at sea. This habit of mind obsessed him throughout his

work, which, as the reader soon perceives, deals with the separate actions of British squadrons and single ships. It is not what it claims to be, a naval history; it is merely a history of the British navy.

The distinction between the two terms is important. The history of the British navy is, of course, the more restricted topic. It is concerned with the development of the fleet, both in *personnel* and *matériel*, its administration in peace time, its exploits in war time. It need not, I think, include the discussion of the wider aspects of strategy, for these depend largely on geography and national policy. The history of the British navy, as I understand the term, deals with the construction, administration and exploits of the fleet. The chronicles compiled with so admirable a care by James form, in my judgment, a perfect example of that limited but intensive treatment.

Naval history, however, ought to take a wider survey. It should comprise all the topics just enumerated, though it will deal lightly with the smaller details, such as single ship actions. But, while

economising energy in regard to the lesser facts, it will launch out into wider realms; it will treat of economics, so far as that science influences the clash of interests at sea, the consequent growth of navies and the causes of maritime conflicts. Naval history will describe the chief geographical discoveries, especially the marine explorations of naval officers. To mention three cases in the period in question, Vancouver, Bass, and Flinders explored the coasts from California to Alaska, those of Victoria and Tasmania, and of South Australia—discoveries of high significance in the development of the British Empire. The naval historian will also show how the discoveries and settlements of the new lands induced new rivalries and influenced the policy of competing nations.

The clash of commercial customs and the growth of legal ideals will also come within the scope of naval history. To take two important episodes in the reign of George III; when the Armed Neutrality League was formed by Catharine II in 1780, the naval historian will not be

content to say of her and the other armed neutrals that they were actuated merely by jealousy of England; or, as Captain Brenton says early in his “Naval History of Great Britain,” the Dutch were induced by French intrigues to side against us. That explanation may satisfy a chronicler; it will not satisfy a naval historian. He will examine the complaints of the neutrals against British maritime customs as practised since “the rule of 1756”; and he will probably admit that at some points the neutrals had just cause of complaint against us. Similarly, when the League of the Armed Neutrals was revived by the Northern Powers in 1800 it will not be enough to state, as James does, that the renewed dispute turned on the case of the capture of the Danish frigate, *Freya*¹. Conflicting theories of maritime law or custom, as well as personal matters, were at the bottom of the dispute.

Finally, to come to the present age, the student of naval history will be loath to shower on our recent policy

¹ James, *Naval History*, III. 41.

towards neutrals the epithets wherewith it has been plentifully bespattered, until all the evidence is forthcoming as to the motives which induced the Government to act very cautiously. For anyone who knows the history of the Armed Neutralities is aware how seriously they tilted the balance against us in the critical years 1780, 1801; also it is clear that in the still more critical years, 1915, 1916, the United States sympathized strongly with neutral claims, and, if we had trampled on those claims, might not improbably have adopted a distinctly hostile attitude.

Questions of this kind cannot be adequately treated without reference both to general history and to International Law; and it may ultimately transpire that the tolerant conduct of the British Government towards neutral shipping was highly politic. Exasperating it was to those who were called on to deal with that shipping, which, doubtless, often adopted with impunity fraudulent devices; but the caution of British policy, when contrasted with the reckless devilry

of German submarine warfare, probably determined one of the larger issues of the war.

But there is another side to the subject of this lecture, viz. What is the attitude of the general historian towards naval history? On the whole, it has been unsatisfactory. Let us consider one or two instances. Macaulay will not be accused of prejudice against the senior service; for the very short account which he gives of its condition in the year 1685 is at least sympathetic. Yet in his brilliant introductory sketch of the making of the English people he scarcely mentions the influence of the Navy; and in his picturesque account of the reigns of James II and William III, the really excellent work of James II for the Navy is barely touched on, and the influence of sea power in deciding William's struggle with France and his re-conquest of Ireland is merely implied, and rarely, if ever, set forth. The only exceptions are his accounts of the Battles off Beachy Head and La Hogue; and these descriptions are vague, rhetorical and un-

convincing. It is clear that the great historian regarded naval battles, still more naval policy, as outside his sphere, despite the fairly obvious fact that the fortunes of England were then decided by the Battle off Cape La Hogue, not by the showy conflicts at Steinkirk and Landen on which Macaulay lavished his pictorial power. Any careful student is well aware of the true facts of the case; yet, even now, they have not received due emphasis in the text-books.

Consider another instance. The volume in the "Political History of England" which deals with the reigns of Anne and the first two Georges is a careful piece of work; yet it is written almost entirely from the landsman's point of view. The friction with Spain in the New World is not clearly portrayed; and the trade disputes with her in the West Indies do not stand out as the fundamental cause of the war which began in 1739. Captain Jenkins's ear is duly presented to the reader; but the maritime and commercial issues then at stake are not explained. It is the same with the naval battles.