

Evolution or Revolution? British Naval Policy in the Fisher Era

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ABSTRACT: This article outlines recent trends in the scholarship on the Royal Navy in the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War. It explains the evolution of the historiography on the topic and outlines how and why new approaches are required to progress our understanding of the topic henceforth.

KEYWORDS: Royal Navy, First World War, Arms Race, Fisher

There has never been a more vibrant time for historians of British naval history in the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War. The past several years have witnessed the proliferation of interest in and scholarship on the topic, which has served to expand our understanding of a wide range of important issues. Until recently, this process has been characterised by attempts by a group of revisionist historians to break free of what remains the first and only comprehensive scholarly synthesis yet produced – that of the pioneering American historian Arthur J. Marder. Marder's over-arching

synthesis, which remains the key resource on the topic for the majority of non-specialists, established the narrative of the inspirational First Sea Lord Admiral Sir John 'Jackie' Fisher presiding over a period of 'revolutionary' and transformational change in naval affairs before the outbreak of War. Seeking to shake the service free of its alleged Victorian stupor and to prepare it to wage modern industrial war against Germany, Fisher both introduced radical new types of warship – epitomized by HMS *Dreadnought* – and also concentrated the navy's major assets in its future battleground, the North Sea. The consequence of Fisher's efforts was that, when war came in 1914, the German battle fleet was directly faced by a much stronger and more formidable opponent in the form of the British Grand Fleet, a concentrated and powerful force of dreadnought battleships that blocked German access to the high seas. As a result, Germany's battleships remained bottled up in harbour for much of the war before ultimately being interned in 1918 and scuttled in Scapa Flow in 1919.

Beginning in the late 1970s, however, a group of revisionist scholars began to challenge some of the central elements of Marder's thesis. These revisionist historians agree with Marder that Fisher transformed the Royal Navy, but they contest the nature, origins and aims of the changes that took place. Rejecting Marder's argument that Fisher's

inspiration was the need to meet the German threat, they contend instead that Fisher projected a far more ambitious, financially motivated programme of technologically driven reforms aimed at meeting the global threats posed by France and Russia. To this end, they claim that he wanted to enact fundamental changes to the force structure and fighting methods of the Royal Navy; abandon battleship construction altogether, defend mainland Britain with a 'swarm' of small torpedo craft, and protect the Empire with a new model of capital ship, the battle cruiser. Thus, instead of Marder's battleship-centred '*Dreadnought* revolution', they propounded 'Fisher's naval revolution', portraying the First Sea Lord as a 'radical naval thinker' whose hidden agenda was fundamentally to alter the manner in which the Royal Navy projected power and prosecuted future warfare.

The revisionist analysis has been instrumental in causing the comfortable orthodoxy that Marder established to be questioned at several levels, but that does not mean it has been accepted itself. On the contrary, it is now confronted with a 'post-revisionist' perspective that challenges it at almost every level. In contrast both to Marder and his revisionist critics, these scholars see the changes that took place before 1914 as much more *evolutionary* than revolutionary. For these scholars the battle fleet, composed of large armoured warships,

remains central to explanations of the defence of the British Isles. Similarly, for these scholars, the new technologies on which revisionists lay such stress – including submarines, wireless and fire control systems – did not invalidate the existing defence paradigm; rather they augmented it with new capabilities and slowly caused it to adapt in appropriate ways.

Why this difference? In part this reflects a stress on actions rather than intentions. For all its supporters' talk of its great analytical breadth, the revisionist interpretation actually focuses rather narrowly upon the person of Jackie Fisher and his supposedly radical reformist agenda. Revisionists paint a picture of Fisher as a frustrated maverick, straining against the institutional conservatism of the Royal Navy with a mixed degree of success. Although he achieved much, he could never persuade his more conservative colleagues to adopt his more radical schemes, with the result that most of them never got off the drawing board – if they ever existed at all. This being so, for revisionists, the goal of their work – and also their principal challenge – is to outline the full extent of Fisher's radical vision and then explain why his great transformative plans never came to pass, and why we should care about them. Post-revisionists have several problems with this approach. First, they question the validity of forming the historical

analysis of a complex administrative organ such as the Admiralty around one man, however remarkable he may have been. In that sense, referring to the naval history of the decade and a half before 1914 as 'the Fisher era' and the reform process as 'the Fisher revolution' instrumentalizes an out-dated single-personality-driven-approach to the period that is fundamentally inappropriate. Second, they question the conceptual merit of attempting to divine what Fisher may or may not have thought about the future of naval warfare as a starting point for the analysis of contemporary Admiralty policy. The First Sea Lord was a notoriously charismatic, complex and manipulative figure, skilled at adapting his message to his intended audience. Prioritizing the views he articulated at different times and in various contexts – sometimes only fleetingly – about things he ultimately did not do over and above the policies that he actually did introduce is to subordinate the reality of Fisher's reforms to the intangible imperative of his fertile, but not always productive imagination. As such, this is a perfect example of what David Edgerton calls 'anti-history'; the explaining of events that don't need to be explained because they never actually happened. By contrast, the alternative perspective, of focusing on what did take place, is what post-revisionist seek to emphasize.

The goal of this special edition is to highlight the ways in which post-revisionists reject the revisionist case. There are three principle justifications for such an endeavour. First, recent years have seen an enormous flourishing of the post-revisionist school. A large number of scholars have emerged who challenge all or part of the revisionist paradigm. This has led to numerous publications spread across a range of monographs, book chapters and articles. However, the sheer scale of post-revisionist writing will only be evident to the most diligent specialists. Nowhere is there a single site that attempts to provide a considered expression of the post-revisionist case across its full range. By placing together a group of articles by post-revisionist historians within one journal both the commonalities and the nuances of their positions can better be seen. Second, the post-revisionist critique has frequently been labelled by revisionist historians as merely an attempt to return to the old orthodoxy of the Marder years. The reality is quite different. The evolution of British naval policy as depicted by post-revisionists is entirely distinct from the revolutionary changes advocated by Marder. Yet, this point can easily be missed as it has never been explicitly taken on. This special edition by showing how, where and why post-revisionists differ from the revisionist school will show why this charge is untenable and move the debate on to more accurate ground. Finally, by rendering the shortcomings of the

superficially authoritative revisionist interpretation open to non-specialist historians, it is hoped that this edition will open the way for a major reconsideration of the role of the Royal Navy in British life and in its international context before and during the First World War.

To achieve these aims, this edition consists of six articles. The first two set the ground by focusing upon the conceptual and methodological differences between the revisionist analysis and the post-revisionist critique. In the first, David Morgan-Owen tests the concept of the 'naval revolution'. Revisionist historians maintain that Fisher's reforms collectively constituted a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and that such a revolution was what Fisher was deliberately trying to achieve. Such an analysis, which anachronistically applies a modern concept to a period in which neither the term nor the idea behind it had any currency, is open to serious objection on several grounds. Foremost amongst these, it assumes that the rapid technological change of the Fisher era necessitated a corresponding paradigm shift in the doctrines of naval warfare. Most notably, that it made a reliance on large armoured warships untenable and instead promoted strategies based upon flotilla craft in narrow seas and fast armoured cruisers on the high seas. Yet, upon closer examination it is clear that this was not the case and that many of the reforms Fisher instituted, far from being

revolutionary were underpinned by existing ideas and had been pre-figured by earlier reforms. In short, Fisher further adapted a constantly evolving navy to new circumstances based upon his career-long engagement with the issues. Thus, far from being a helpful means of understanding naval policy in the Fisher era, the application of the RMA concept has the distorting effect of imposing a sudden transformative paradigm shift where none in fact existed.

Building upon this dissection of the revisionist mis-adaption of the RMA concept, is an article by Matthew Seligmann scrutinizing the evidential basis of the revisionist analysis. The revisionists have been highly critical of the manner in which previous generations of naval historians have approached the documentary record. Marder, for example, was dismissed by one as a mere 'scissors-and-paste' historian, a phrase intended to imply that he could only read documents literally and failed to appreciate how a proper assessment of their true context would impact upon the way in which they were understood. Furthermore, the revisionists have made much of their own supposedly more sophisticated research methodology, which they claim takes account of the broader context and so reveals the deeper insights that earlier historians missed. However, a detailed analysis of the approach to documentary analysis taken in the articulation of two key revisionist

arguments – flotilla defence and the ‘technical-tactical synthesis’ – demonstrates that the superior methodology in fact consists of little more than asserting that numerous surviving Admiralty files were not intended as accurate representations of the navy’s true policy, but as smokescreens intended to hide their real goals. Having by such means cast doubt on much of the extant documentary record and the interpretations that are grounded upon it, revisionists then advance alternative readings of Admiralty policy based upon speculative depictions of what they assume from their reading of the context must have been contained in now missing files. However, as this article demonstrates, if such dubious accusations of conspiracy and cover up are dismissed and a careful appreciation of surviving documents is prioritized over imaginative but nonetheless speculative hypotheses constructed largely on an archival vacuum, a very different picture emerges.

The remaining four articles take the broad conceptual and methodological points articulated in the opening two papers and use them as a basis for systematically analysing specific revisionist claims and arguments. The first proposition to be tested is the ‘technical-tactical synthesis’, Jon Sumida’s theory that in 1912 the Royal Navy abandoned long-range gunnery and developed a secret plan to fight

the expected future battle with the German fleet by means of a devastating pulse of rapid fire at medium range. Addressed in brief in the second paper, but purely in terms of how it mishandles the sources, this idea is now subjected to further and more detailed scrutiny from two alternative angles. First of all there is the tactical dimension. Stephen McLaughlin grounds his analysis of Sumida's theory in a broad assessment of the developing tactical thinking of the Royal Navy's fleet leadership up to the eve of the war. As he shows, far from building a fleet designed for a brief medium range battle, the Admiralty were investing heavily in two different battleship types – slower vessels that would fight at a distance and faster battleships that would seek to outflank the enemy. This was a procurements strategy that only made sense if engagements were expected to last some time, a prospect requiring long range gunnery.

McLaughlin's contentions are complemented by John Brooks' analysis of the Royal Navy's wartime gunnery exercises and developments in gunnery technique. If fighting units seek to perfect the techniques they intend to use in battle, then Brooks demonstrates conclusively that the technical-tactical synthesis was not what the Royal Navy was preparing to implement. Indeed, rather than fixating on one technologically driven engagement method, Brooks shows that the

Royal Navy prepared for a range of contingencies, of which long-range battle was the most favoured.

The next article shifts the focus to Fisher's supposedly decisive influence upon British naval policy even after his retirement in 1910. Revisionists have long argued that the wily admiral continued to dictate Admiralty policy through his influence over the young and ambitious First Lord, Winston Churchill. The reality, as Christopher Bell proves, is completely different. Whatever influence Fisher may have possessed, Churchill was definitely his own man and did things his own way. The suggestion to the contrary is based on a misreading of a small selection of sources, which, far from being put in the correct context, are consistently taken out of context. In addition, as Bell demonstrates there are also glaring inconsistencies within the revisionist case, a problem accentuated by the fact that Nicholas Lambert and Jon Sumida do not actually agree on what the 'naval revolution' was, and both have recently changed their own positions. The result is to misrepresent the Churchill era in spectacular and confusing fashion.

The edition closes with a detailed assessment of the latest offering in the revisionist canon, Nicholas Lambert's hypothesis that in 1914 the

British government had a short-war economic warfare strategy that would have led to victory had they possessed the courage and persistency to implement it fully. This argument, the latest in a long line of works that attempts to suggest that the slaughter in the trenches could have been avoided if only leaders had more imagination, is shown by John Coogan to rest on a very shaky documentary basis. Key archives in America and the vital evidence they contain are totally ignored, while British documents are consistently used in a selective fashion. The result is an unsustainable argument that follows the usual revisionist line of suggesting that there was a secret plan for which the evidence no longer exists courtesy of a deliberate cover up. Coogan's analysis shows otherwise, demonstrating that by looking at the evidence available rather than the papers supposedly missing (although their existence cannot be proven) British economic warfare policy was anything but revolutionary. It was instead precisely what Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, said it was: an ad hoc wartime effort to 'secure the maximum of blockade that could be enforced without a rupture with the United States.'

Taken together, the six articles amassed here show a range of areas in which the 'naval revolution' argument of the revisionist school is under

scrutiny and offer an insight into some of the objections that have been raised to this concept. This is essential if we are to move away from the fruitless debate about Marder's legacy and to start to move the naval history of the pre-First World War era forward again. This is now a lively, contested area full of new possibilities. To develop these fully, some of the older and now discredited ideas of a former era need to be torn down and some of the more speculative concepts of recent years need proper scrutiny. This special edition is a step in that direction.