

MILITARY HISTORY

Maritime Strategy: The Legacies of Mahan and Corbett as Philosophers of Sea Power

PROFESSOR BARRY M. GOUGH

It is commonplace to acknowledge the importance of sea power in history. Any person with even a scant smattering of modern history will credit the advantage possessed in time past by those who controlled and used the sea. The Phoenicians dominated the Mediterranean and gained its trade. Athens defeated the Persians at Salamis and built a great civilisation. Rome secured Carthage by use of the sea and thereby expanded her empire. The Turks were defeated at Lepanto, and this led to an eventual collapse of their land power. In turn Portugal, Spain, Holland and France all exercised a dominion overseas via sea power. Mainly at France's expense did Great Britain "rule the waves", it is said, and came to be keeper of the world's order in the nineteenth century. The United States, Japan, Germany and the Soviet Union have all sought to gain influence on and in consequence over, the seas and today, as yesterday, the relevance of sea power is enduring.

The importance of sea power

In our times we must not forget that despite the influence of air power, both in war planes, transport and personnel carriers, sea power remains fundamental to world influence. NATO spans the Atlantic and links the old world with the new. The water bridge between the Hudson and the Thames, as between Washington, London and Bonn, is the fundamental link of the NATO alliance and would be militarily so in a sustained war. Strategists and weapons analysts may be right when they talk of the immediate value of the intercontinental and sea-to-land ballistic missile. But in the end, as history has demonstrated, sea power will be brought to bear on the course of continental and intercontinental history.¹ Eventually he who controls the sea can influence, though not totally, what goes on on land.² In short, the study of the theory of sea power is as valid today as it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the two classical theorists Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Stafford Corbett

were laying down the principles of maritime strategy. In that age, sea power constituted the major means of controlling the destiny of a nation's activities as well as that of her rivals overseas. Today, with technological innovation, sea power is less easy to categorise as to its specific utility. But in the classical era of the battleship, these two strategists and historians of sea power laboured to convince others of the value and utility of a nation-state possessing a sea-going capability that could fulfil and meet the national objectives of that nation-state in time of war.

These two philosophers of sea power were endeavouring to foresee how the military use of the sea would determine the outcome of the then dramatic and dangerous shifts and imbalances in world politics. For nearly a century since 1815 Britannia had held the sceptre of the seas. British maritime preponderance had played a major role in suppressing slave traders and obliterating pirates. As a world police force, the Royal Navy had presented a powerful force for human good. Yet by 1900 that humanitarian role in keeping the security of the seas had been supplemented by new international strategic realities, more especially the rise of Germany, Japan and the United States as naval powers and a shifting and unsteady balance of power in Western Europe. The era of "Pax Britannica" was drawing to a close. But what would replace it, and what role would sea power have in the future direction of international affairs? These were vitally important questions. Mahan and Corbett knew in their own different ways that history held valuable clues that would indicate answers.

Alfred Mahan

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), an American naval officer, teacher and strategist, is justly regarded as having laid the foundations of modern naval history. The author of over a dozen books and 137 articles, he established the basis for our understanding of the era from 1660 to 1815, the classic age of fighting sail, when the nation-states of western

The author is Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario.

© RUSI Journal Winter 1988

Europe—Spain, Britain, Holland and France—were engaged in a struggle for economic advantage. His work explained how Britain acquired global leadership. It explained, too, how France fell from power during Napoleon's era. It also explained how the infant United States was able to press Britain to extremities in a world-ranging sea war in 1812.³

To Mahan, Lord Nelson was the embodiment of British sea power. A skilful sailor, courageous fighter and superb tactician, Nelson stood for all that was most illustrious in Britannia's brilliance. To Mahan also, the careful and detailed study of naval battle, which he saw as the natural outcome of strategy and national purpose, provided lessons. His was the deductive approach. History taught that he who could command the sea could command his enemies.

The principles of sea power

Mahan's most influential work, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* (London, 1889; Boston, 1890) constituted a deliberate attempt to define the principles of sea power in an age of technological transition. This work set forth three considerations on which maritime dominance could rest: instruments of war (including bases), seaborne commerce, and colonies. These three, what we might call the inter-circling rings, gave Britain pre-eminence, argued Mahan. Not only did Britain possess weapons of war, including overseas bases and a controlling geographical position off the portals of the European continent, she also possessed the near monopoly of the carrying trades of the ocean and a host of colonies overseas from which to draw resources, material, supplies, food, and manpower. National prosperity, founded upon a programme of mercantile regulation and support, also gave Britain her greatness. From this, Britain possessed a theory of naval strategy and defence. Without a profitable seaborne carrying trade, without colonies, and without trained seamen and ships, Britain was powerless. Thus any nation aspiring to greatness must maintain the instruments of war, the means of its overseas trade, and the mechanisms of colonial influence.

A full critique of Mahan lies elsewhere, but students of sea power such as the Americans the Sprouts, the Canadian-Briton Gerald Graham, and the Yale University scholar Paul Kennedy have explained that Mahan must not go unquestioned.⁴ Here we must note a few of Mahan's fallacies. Firstly, Mahan believed that a concentration of battle units was essential for the nation-state. That concentration and that concentration only, could win a sea war. In itself, coastal defence was of minimal value. Moreover, cruiser warfare—that is, discursive naval action such as the raiding of enemy ports or the sinking of merchant ships far away from the likely main centre of battle—did not really count for much. The big blow, the decisive battle—that was the key. Secondly, as regards the value of seaborne commerce, Mahan believed that the merchant marine formed a certain shield of defensive power, an auxiliary force behind which a people in time of difficulty could gather strength. The merchant marine as a reserve force may have utility in a sea war, but as a backbone

of naval power it was readily understood by the British in the mercantilist age, though rejected in the nineteenth century by Nelson's successors with no real loss to British naval pre-eminence. After all, navies are artificial creations of states. They do not grow from the ports or the fishing folk of great lakes and sea waters. As to the third consideration, colonies, here Mahan was weakest. He assumed that Britain was great because of her colonies, colonies won at the expense of Spain, Holland and France. In fact, a nation does not have to possess colonies to have naval power and greatness and can have instead many forms of informal control equally as valuable as formal possession. Mahan led European states into a trap. Not only did Mahan influence governments to build battleships and establish bases but he induced them to annex territories overseas that would afford them new keys of control as the routes of oceanic commerce or warship passage. Mahan may himself have been a cause of the First World War, as the British diplomatic historian Sir Charles Webster reminded his students. Certainly his influence on the United States Congress, on the Emperor of Japan, and on the Kaiser of Germany was profound. To the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty in London, his writings and lectures provided music to their ears, precisely what was required to bring support in the government, press and tax-paying public for a naval rearmament capable of sustaining Britain's beleaguered seaborne dominance against the threats of foreign rivals.

However, on purely strategic considerations, Mahan deserves a more sustained investigation. To repeat, this American student of naval affairs argued that the past demonstrated that sooner or later command of the sea—that is, acquisition and control of the ocean's communications—could only be obtained by a great battle or a series of battles ending in a decisive and clearly established outcome. Naval strategy, Mahan wrote, was based on some immutable fundamental truths derived from historical example. Only by scientific development and technological innovation, he reasoned, would the immutable strategic laws be modified, though not fundamentally altered. In consequence, readers of his work and listeners to his lectures were led to believe that the great battle at sea was the principle thing and all others were ancillary thereunto. They were also convinced that cruiser warfare and technological innovation—torpedoes, mines, cruiser warfare, submarines, submarine communications—were all of secondary merit.

The mistakes of strategists

Looking at this from the vantage point of the classical age of the battleship of the *Dreadnought* era we can see why several grand mistakes were made by strategists. For one, the Sea Lord Admiral Sir John Fisher disparaged the use of gunboats, cruisers, and inshore vessels, held little credence in seaborne commerce raiding, and concentrated all his attention on "all big gun" ships and gunnery efficiency. Colonies and Dominions were a liability (and here Fisher departed from Mahan) save as coaling

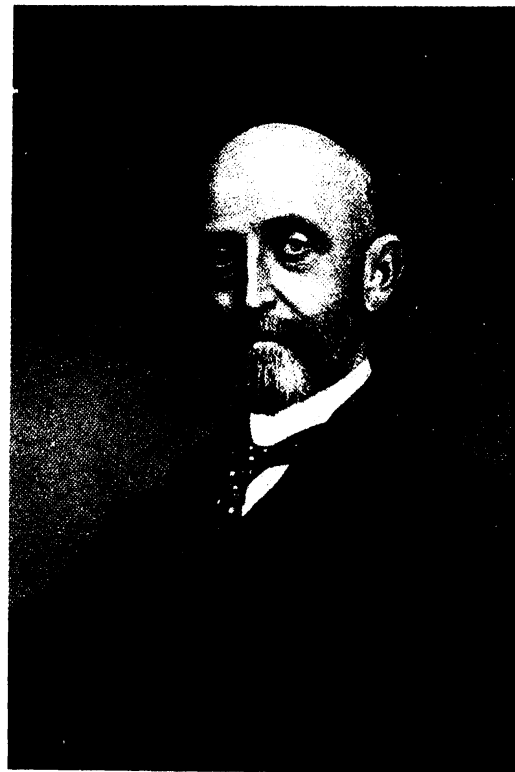
depots and refitting establishments.

Thus the Grand Fleet based on Scapa Flow formed Britain's first line of defence in 1914. The utility of this fleet was profound because it kept the Imperial High Seas Fleet from dominating the North Sea and the Germans from invading Britain. However, it did not stop occasional raids on the ports of Harwich, Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. Especially, it did not halt highly successful German overseas cruiser warfare in distant waters such as the South Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans.⁵ Even as regards anti-submarine warfare, including detection and hunting and anti-submarine measures, especially convoy establishment and protection, the great fleet in being had its limits and even liabilities. The Grand Fleet could keep its opposite bottled up in The Jade and Kiel after Jutland, but meanwhile a whole other war was being fought for control of the North Atlantic sea-lanes. In a protracted war such as that of 1914-18, or indeed 1939-45, economic considerations weighed mightily in the eventual tipping of the balance. Just winning the decisive battle, as Mahan had emphasised, was really in the long run insufficient in and of itself. History, in fact shows, and Sir Basil Liddell Hart acknowledges this in his classic book *The First World War*, that the most powerful of national instruments, the British Navy, was in the end the determining factor in Allied success.⁶ Both in home and distant waters, seeking out, containing and/or destroying the enemy, was the Navy's objective satisfactorily achieved. But this was not done by decisive battle.

Mahan's influence

Thus of Mahan we may say that his influence was profound but not convincing. He awakened political heads of various nations to the reality of naval warfare by great ships. He also, after nearly a century of gunboat influence, restored to pre-eminence the vitality and utility of the great fleet and the strategy and tactics of using the fleet to obtain command of the sea, by means of which a war could be won. He was, besides, a propagandist of sea power. However, he was misguided in believing that colonies were a necessary foundation of a great nation and fleet. Similarly he, and here I am less critical, convinced many of the necessity of a merchant navy ancillary to a fighting navy. Lastly, he generated a "big ship" mentality and a belief in the necessity of a concentration of force which was strategically acceptable in one way, for such a force was necessary, but that in another denied the principle of sea war which he had in fact described in his books: viz., that in a sea war, discursive action will occur: the weaker power will employ cruiser warfare, or commerce raiding, against its more powerful adversary and will do so rather than risk engagement with the units of the enemy. And again, Mahan failed to appreciate the central role of convoys in a protracted war and the profound effect that submarines, torpedoes and mines would play in a future naval war.

Mahan's belief that a *guerre de course* was unlikely to be decisive was swept away by German U-boats in both the First and Second World Wars. This was only, we must remember, because of four factors.



Alfred Thayer Mahan
Photo: BBC Hulton Picture Library

Firstly, the U-boat possessed an ability to remove itself from the main place of naval war, the ocean's surface, by taking advantage of submersion, and this was something entirely new in war. Secondly, Admiral Fisher, one of the first to foresee the possibilities of the submarine, did practically nothing to develop countermeasures, and thus the U-boat started with an unnecessarily big lead, and not until 1916 did the Royal Navy have depth charges. Thirdly, many British strategists believed that the Germans would not use the submarine in violation of international law against seaborne commerce. And fourthly, in 1914 Britain was more dependent than ever on imports, especially food. If in 1913 Fisher and Prince Louis of Battenburg, the First Sea Lord, misjudged the form that sea warfare would take, it cannot be said to do violence to Mahan's views pronounced two decades before. In any case, it does not affect his authority on matters as they were in his own period. In short, Mahan deserves to be evaluated in the context of the times in which he was writing which were those of profound technological change during which the principles of maritime strategy were changing.

Sir Julian Corbett

In large measure, the limitations of Mahan were repeated by his English near contemporary Corbett, but with different degrees of emphasis. Sir Julian Corbett (1854-1922) was a brilliant exponent of the principles of maritime strategy. Thus if Mahan is to be remembered as having brought naval history to its

proper, rightful place in the history of international relations and economic affairs, Corbett is to be enshrined as the person who best understood the utility of sea power, even in limited war. Like Mahan, he was a student of history. Like Mahan he came to the subject at a rather senior phase of his life. Born to a well-to-do family, Corbett studied law at Cambridge, flirted with being a novelist, travelled widely and then settled down to write history. His two-volume *Drake and the Tudor Navy* (1898) and *The Successors of Drake* (1900) were brilliant explanations of sea warfare and combined operations in English history.

He understood the way in which great projects conceived in the brains of planners of high ability acquired almost a will of their own when launched on the sea of seemingly discordant movements.⁷

He explained the relationship of sea warfare to the state, and how a state's defensive or protective interests could be secured by command and control of the sea. The Royal Navy guaranteed Britain's security. It prevented continental Europe from falling under the control of one country. Corbett's view was anchored in the factors of geography. Yet unlike Mahan his views were strangely non-economic, to the neglect of commercial users of the ocean and, to the use of the sea as a means of conveying the stuffs of victory in a sustained war. Corbett's study of the Elizabethan era had impressed on him the utility not of just a navy but of combined operations, that is, the necessity of the army and the navy working together to sustain the interests of the state. By 1902, he was giving, as *strategic* lecturer, the first of a series of lectures at Greenwich to the Naval War Course, subsequently taught at Devonport and Portsmouth.

In preparing his lectures, Corbett kept in mind the injunctions of the Director of the War Course, Captain W. J. May. Corbett was at liberty to choose his own material but was to focus mainly on tactics and strategy. The subject, May said, ought "to be so modern that some lessons applicable to present day warfare should be deductible from it". And May hoped that above all Corbett would give due attention to strategy. He was to present to his senior officers the principles of strategy in such a way as his students would understand that, in May's wry words, "expediency and strategy are not always in accord".⁸ As Corbett rather whimsically put it himself some years later, his leading theme was "the deflection of strategy by politics".⁹

Some principles of maritime strategy

The results of this enterprise, these lectures, became his classic book *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. It was published in London in 1911, was republished by Conway Maritime Press of London in 1972, with an introduction by Professor Brian Ranft, and is now published in a new edition (1987) by the US Naval Institute Press, with an introduction by Eric Grove. This work merits close examination. It has its origins in a document called "Notes on Strategy", or "The Green Pamphlet". This was a handbook, put together at the insistence and with the

guidance of Captain Edmond Slade, May's successor as Director of the War Course and himself a rising star in both Admiralty intelligence gathering and Navy education reform. Slade, we should note, stood close to the highly-influential Admiral Fisher and was keenly interested in combined operations, as was Corbett. He had Fisher's full support in extending the work of the War Course, and, in consequence, had that of Corbett's as well. Slade was conscious of the fact that he was not to teach 40 or 50 naval officers "their work", for that would have been presumptuous. Rather, he was to assist the First Sea Lord

... by establishing a board [or corps] of officers whose function it is to thrash out systematically all sorts of war problems, quite independently, and unhampered by the routine of an Admiralty department . . .

The "Green Pamphlet", or more correctly "Strategic Terms and Definitions Used in Lectures on Naval History", was a nuts-and-bolts book of strategy. It was keenly reflective of the combined operations that Corbett had gleaned from his reading of documents relating to Drake's era. It was also a mirror of Slade's shared interest in amphibious warfare, and the latter's interest in Clausewitz and the concepts of total war.¹⁰ The Green Pamphlet emphasised naval strategy as an integral part of the art of war. War, being "a form of political intercourse that begins at the point where force is introduced to gain the ends of foreign politics" meant to Corbett that the gyrations of fleets, at the command of Admirals, were not ends in themselves. They were integral parts of making war. As regards "strategy" *per se*, Corbett wrote that it divided itself into two. On the one hand was major strategy (some have called this "grand strategy") that is, the purpose of war, including international relations, and economic functions. On the other hand was minor strategy, that is, the particulars of waging war, including planning army, navy or combined operations. Beyond these considerations were those of posture—whether offensive or defensive. To assert influence or acquire an objective was offensive. To deny the enemy an objective was defensive. In weighing the merits of offensive and defensive postures, the former took precedence in value, and this is not the least bit surprising by virtue of the unwritten British maxim that you took war to the enemy's frontier and did not wage war on your home ground. Offensive action led to quick, decisive and even final decisions. And, if defensive war had to be fought it could be employed as a disguise for offensive war. But it ought to be discarded as soon as strength and circumstances permitted. But the value of defensive operations, including counterattacks and diversions to draw off enemy strength and confuse enemy strategists, were linked to surprise and mobility, two contributions to successful combined operations. And to more easily distinguish areas of influence or battle, Corbett defined "theatres of war" and "theatres of operations", where if an enemy's fleet existed that fleet would be the usual objective.

From these definitions or areas of concern we come naturally to Corbett's theories of naval strategy. Recall that Mahan believed that command of the sea would only be acquired by a major confrontation, a

decisive encounter, in which one fleet (or, as in the example of Trafalgar, a combined enemy fleet) was vanquished. Corbett argued otherwise. Communications and their maintenance constituted the essence of naval influence. Thus to keep open "lines of operation" and "lines of communications" offered the strategic objective for which the navy would function. Supply lines, running from bases to theatres of operations, lateral lines linking theatres, and lines of retreat, that is, supply lines in reserve—these were the avenues of war. The "problems of Naval Strategy", to quote Corbett, "can be reduced to terms of passage and communication and this is probably the best method of solving them." As he explained,

... communications govern both commerce movement and oversea expeditions, and the disruption of an enemy's communications or the securing of one's own links with allies determined the flow of trade, and furthered or hindered military operations ashore.¹¹

This working definition of naval strategy based on the lessons of history had intimate connections with "diplomatic, financial and military aspects of major strategy".¹²

A unique contribution

It will be seen that this differs greatly from Mahan and constitutes Corbett's unique contribution to naval strategic thought. Command of the sea, if won in battle, was not final or axiomatic. Rather, command was asserted in theatres to prevent the enemy from disrupting one's own communications. Nonetheless, even if local control existed, the fleet would eventually be obliged to seek out and destroy the enemy's fleet. But even a general command of the sea was not essential to all overseas expeditions. And as long as the weaker fleet remained in existence it would endeavour to avoid a major confrontation with its superior adversary.

Put differently, this meant that a major battle should not always be fought. To quote Corbett:

... under certain conditions, therefore, it may not be the primary function of the fleet to seek out the enemy's fleet and destroy it, because general command may be in dispute, while local command may be with us, and political or military considerations may demand for us an operation for which such local command is sufficient, and which cannot be delayed until we have obtained a complete decision...¹³

Professor Schurman, Corbett's biographer, rightly appraises the above as meaning that "command of the sea" is too loose a term for definition according to Corbett's view. He urges that instead we should substitute "control of passage and communication". Put another way, a strategist ought not to consider whether his forces possessed command of the sea but whether they had security of the necessary lines of communications free from enemy obstruction.¹⁴

Now as regards blockade, or the cutting off of coastal access by the enemy or neutrals trading with the enemy, Corbett took pains to differentiate between "close blockade" and "observation

blockade". Close blockade could prevent an enemy from putting to sea. Observation blockade, by contrast, had the objective of enticing the enemy's forces to sea in order to combat them in a decisive encounter.

In all of the above ways the control of sea communications took precedence in Corbett's mind. The object of naval war was to secure command of the sea in order to secure and maintain communications. The means of doing this was the constitution of fleets, that is, the material of naval warfare. The theory of such a naval war would be the concentration and the dispersal of the force. By obtaining a decision and by establishing a blockade or both, command of the sea, that is, communications, could be secured. In Corbett's words,

Command of the sea therefore means nothing but the control of maritime communications, whether for commercial or military purposes. The object of naval warfare is the control of communications, and not, as in land warfare, the conquest of territory.¹⁵

To do this an offensive action had to be taken, the object being to deprive the enemy of the use of the seas. To do this a defensive action also had to be taken, the goal being to protect one's own shipping. In all these considerations, mobility and flexibility of forces were essential, a concentration of units to deal with major threats was mandatory, and combined operations to secure overseas objectives were vital.



Sir Julian Corbett
Photo: The Illustrated London News Picture Library

Naval thinking—high art?

The Green Pamphlet and its successor *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* brought naval thinking to the level of high art. Corbett's was the clearest exposition of fighting at sea. In large measure it stands the tests of time and remains a classic. However, it is not without its shortcomings. For one thing, it failed to anticipate the role of enemy submarines in war. Believing merchant ships to be faster and less vulnerable Corbett mistakenly put little credence in a U-boat war. For another, he tended to disparage cruiser warfare, and again in 1914-18 German activities in a commerce war exceeded his expectations. Further, unlike Mahan, he did not see the necessity of waging a convoy war, and his unfortunate contribution to the Admiralty's forgetting of that great lesson of the classical age of sea warfare, 1756-1815, when convoys were used extensively and successfully, should not be forgotten. This was indeed an "ironic failure" by a great student of sea power.¹⁶ Perhaps his greatest failing, and one for which he was not completely to blame, was that he tended to give the impression that it was not essential for the fleet to engage the enemy provided it could secure command of the sea by its very existence and its geographical advantage. Corbett was fond of citing instances in which sea power had limits. Take this instance. In 1907 he wrote,

Of late years, the world has become so impressed with the efficacy of sea power that we are inclined to forget how impotent it is of itself to decide a war against great commercial states, how tedious is the pressure of naval action unless it be nicely co-ordinated with military and diplomatic pressure . . .

He quoted Nelson in the Gulf of Genoa: "We English have to regret that we cannot always decide the fate of Empires on the sea."¹⁷

British naval tradition

Corbett's tendency to be passive lay directly across the course of British naval tradition embodied in Nelson—to engage the enemy at whatever risk. Better to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all—witness the censure of Rear Admiral Ernest Troubridge's "failure to endeavour to engage" the *Goeben* in August 1914 as being classified as "deplorable and contrary to the traditions of the British Navy".¹⁸ The *Goeben*'s going into hiding in the Dardanelles taking the *Breslau* with her was a sorry beginning for the Royal Navy in the Great War, Admiral David Beatty wrote.¹⁹ On a much larger scale is the example of the Battle of Jutland. This famous encounter of 31 May 1916 pitted the British Grand Fleet, consisting of a Battle Fleet and a Battlecruiser Fleet, against the German Imperial High Seas Fleet, comprising a Battle Fleet and Battlecruiser Force. The engagement was indecisive but served to maintain "local" command of the sea and contain the Germans in or near home ports. To that degree it was a British victory. But it was not in the Nelsonian tradition. It was no Trafalgar. Corbett, in consequence,

much of the blame, not only because of his heretical views on the non-necessity of engagement provided national goals were met in war but as to the writing of the official history of the war at sea, Corbett being co-author.²⁰ As long as the Jutland controversy simmered Corbett remained in hot water. Corbett supported Admiral Jellicoe's action and many, in turn, supported Corbett's account of the battle. Their Lords of the Admiralty, however, issued the disclaimer that they found that

. . . some of the principles advocated in the book, especially the tendency to minimise the importance of seeking battle and of forcing it to a conclusion, are directly in conflict with their views.²¹

This was a head-on rebuttal of Corbett, and as it came just after his death and had truly misread the genius of the man, we can applaud his biographer's quip that the passage was "the only way some members of the Admiralty could strike at Corbett, who, from the grave, had defeated them".²²

Weaknesses of *Principles*

Yet it is fair to add that the intricacies of Corbett's *Principles* are in themselves a minefield. For instance, they are not always clear on the vital matter of seeking-out-and-destroying the enemy's main force. They are also weak on convoy use, formation and support. Moreover, they are shallow on blockade theory and use. They overlook economic considerations in protracted war. They give little attention to law and order responsibilities of sea forces in time of peace. But they represent, better than any other written statement, the intricacies of waging a sea war, that is, one involving combined operations. The reason for this is that Corbett understood the value of sustaining communications on and over the seas. And in reference to the First World War, the historian can gain a good deal of evidence to support the view that at the war's outset Their Lordships in London knew very little about convoys, U-boat warfare, and cruiser-raiding—lessons they could have learned from history or the study of technology at the same time that they cherished the ancient view of the concentration and use of a battle fleet.

Thus in Mahan and Corbett we have two great, if different prophets of sea power and naval warfare. Both exercised influences on the Royal Navy and other state navies besides. The strength of Mahan lies in his appreciation of the elements of sea power, the decisive battle fought through successful tactics, and the necessity of convoys. By contrast, the value of Corbett lies in his understanding of how to sustain communications, not by any great encounter but through other, more discursive means. In the end, traditional analysts have tended to support Mahan's view that command of the sea—being the object of a navy from which all other benefits flow, including maintenance of sea communications and sustained overseas combined operations—is the be all and end all of naval strategy. There again, however, Mahan has his disputants. For the seventeenth century, Geoffrey Symcox has shown the value of *guerre de course*, the utility of a strategy of attraction as opposed

to a decisive battle. For the sixteenth century, John Guilmartin Jr. has shown in his work on the Mediterranean that amphibious warfare can be the main direction and conduct of a war without fleet engagement.²³ Other cases, as presented here, included that of the Great War when Allied objectives were met without a decisive big victory. There again, Corbett had his detractors and critics—as we have seen.

Misread or not read at all

Alas, of both Mahan and Corbett, and more especially the latter, it could be said that not only were they misread but that they were not read at all. In 1915 Lord Esher, a key British defence planner, put it this way:

Julian Corbett writes one of the best books in our language upon political and military strategy. All sorts of lessons, some of inestimable value, may be gleaned from it. No one, except perhaps Winston, who matters just now has read it . . . Obviously history is written for schoolmasters and arm-chair strategists. Statesmen and warriors pick their way through the dusk.²⁴

Even in our own times the same could be said. Naval history and maritime affairs generally remain undervalued subjects in the study of international relations and strategic thought. Except in war studies courses, how many people read the likes of Clark Reynolds, John Moore, Geoffrey Till, or Colin Gray? The Royal Naval College, Greenwich, now teaches no naval history as such, save for a course in strategic studies since 1945. And in various United States' universities such as Maine, Duke and Western Washington "Boats" courses are taught mainly by sailor-scholars who spend their weekends under canvas when they can. Otherwise, naval history is not much taught save at war college, marine academies and naval institutions.

The proof of time

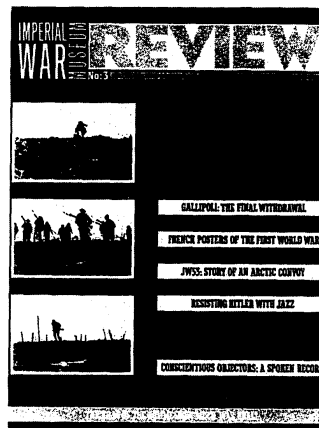
But let us remember that in great and limited wars of this century alone there is proof enough concerning the importance of sea power. Professor Geoffrey Till of the Royal Naval College rightly calls for three valid considerations, and these serve as a collaborative position to this study of Mahan and Corbett. First, security of the seas remains the key to prosperity of countries, for the economic value of the sea continues to be enhanced, for the use of the sea is vital in territorial conflicts of neighbouring countries. Secondly, neither sea power nor command of the sea can be regarded as absolute or final. Minor as well as major states have a stake in sea power; accordingly, even small states should understand maritime matters. Lastly, history has lessons, as Mahan and Corbett well knew. Naval historian-strategists richly deserve to be read, no matter how tortuous their prose, how circuitous their arguments. "Their counsel," writes Till, "is of abiding value not so much for the answers they apply, for these are often conflicting or found to be in error, but because they help to identify the questions that need asking."²⁵

That surely is the utility of studying Mahan and Corbett as philosophers of sea power. Not that they supplied infallible laws based on the examples and lessons of history. Far from it, in fact. But because they examined the fundamental question: how can a nation's objectives be sustained in war, as in peace? They chose to show that sea warfare, whose objective was the control of and over the seas (that is sea communication), would allow a maritime state to sustain itself if it had the instruments of war and strategy of battle in sufficient size and proportion. To this day, it is upon this fundamental principle that world influence rests. Continental powers may be significant in their influence from their home heartlands, as Admiral Sergei Gorshkov implies.²⁶ However, in any engagement to determine world hegemony ultimately he who can control and sustain his sea communications will have to be reckoned with. And at that time if not before, the ghosts of Mahan and Corbett will spring to life anew.

1 Captain John Moore, "The Constancy of Sea Power in Strategic Considerations", *International Perspectives* (Ottawa), November-December 1975, pp. 13-18. Also, Geoffrey Till et al., *Maritime Strategy and the Nuclear Age* (2nd ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), and Peter Nailor, "The Utility of Maritime Power: Today and Tomorrow", *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 131, No. 3 (September, 1986), pp. 15-21.

2 History is replete with examples of how sea power and command of the sea by one belligerent in and of itself cannot influence or shorten a conflict on a continent. The Crimea and

JUST PUBLISHED



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM REVIEW NO.3

An annual publication for both the serious enquirer and the amateur enthusiast.

Available from the Imperial War Museum,
Lambeth Road, SE1 6HZ
(01-735 8922 ext.317 for information/Access/Visa)
and all good bookshops.
ISBN 0901627 46 1
£7.95

Also available Review No.1 and Review No.2

the second Anglo-Boer War are two examples from the age of Pax Britannica. Ruling the waves was not enough. Captain S. W. Roskill *The Strategy of Sea Power: Its Development and Application* (London: Collins, 1962), p. 91. The question sometimes devolves to a simplistic debate—an either/or (and perhaps fallacious) one. See Paul Kennedy, "Mahan versus Mackinder: Two Interpretations of British Sea Power", *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945: Eight Studies* (London: Fontana, 1984), pp. 41-85.

3 See Till, *passim*. The most recent bibliography of Mahan's works is John B. Hattendorf and Lynn C. Hattendorf, comps. *A Bibliography of the Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan* (Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College Press, 1986). For a critique as regards the United States position, see Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776-1918* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), pp. 203-205. Clark G. Reynolds, "The Thalassocratic Determinism of Captain Mahan", in Clark G. Reynolds and William J. McAndrew, eds., *University of Maine 1971 Seminar in Maritime and Regional Studies Proceedings* (Orono: University of Maine Printing Office, 1972), pp. 77-85. A recent study has correctly concluded that Mahan had a precursor in the United States. See Frederick C. Drake, *The Empire of the Seas: A Biography of Rear Admiral Robert Wilson Schufeldt, USN* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984). Also, Robert Seager II, *Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Man and his Letters* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1977), various biographies by William Puleston, Charles Taylor and William Livezey, and Donald M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), ch. 4. See also, D. Schurman, "Mahan Revisited", *Militarhistorisk Tidskrift* 1982, pp. 29-43.

4 H. and M. Sprout, *Rise of American Naval Power*; Gerald S. Graham's comments in *Proceedings of Maine Seminar* pp. 88-89, and Paul Kennedy, "Mahan Versus Mackinder", and *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1982).

5 See Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, Vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). Also, for a more popular version, Geoffrey Bennett, *Naval Battles of the First World War* (London: Pan Books, 1983), chs. 2-6.

6 Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart, *The First World War* (various editions).

7 Donald M. Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922: Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1981), pp. 19-20.

8 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 33.

9 J. S. Corbett, "The Teaching of Naval and Military History", *History*, April 1916; quoted in *ibid.*

10 Karl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), Prussian general of Polish descent and Director of the German War School expounded in *On War* (published posthumously 1832) the doctrine of total war. The influence of his theory on military science (and on Slade and Corbett) was enormous.

11 Here I quote Schurman, *Corbett*, p. 51.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 52. As Professor Schurman explains (*ibid.*, n. 1) the idea in its modern setting owed much to J. C. R. Colomb, *The Protection of Our Commerce and Distribution of Our Naval Forces Considered* (London, 1867).

13 Schurman, *Corbett*, pp. 53-4.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

15 Quoted by Ranft, in Corbett, *Some Principles*, p. xii.

16 *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

17 J. S. Corbett, *England in the Seven Years War* (2 vols.; London: Longman, 1907), 1: 5.

18 Troubridge was court-martialed but was found not guilty; The Lords of the Admiralty never again entrusted him with a command at sea. Bennett, *Naval Battles*, pp. 23-25.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

20 Schurman, *Corbett*, pp. 58-9, 185-193.

21 Admiralty memorandum, 22 February 1923, Adm. 116/2067, Public Record Office, London; Schurman, *Corbett*, p. 193.

22 Schurman, *Corbett*, p. 194.

23 These and other critiques of Mahan are by John Hattendorf and can be found in Till, *Maritime Strategy*, pp. 61-62.

24 Esher to Sir Maurice Hankey (Committee of Imperial Defence), 15 March 1915, Schurman, *Education of a Navy*, p. 190.

25 *op. cit.*, Till, *Maritime Strategy*, p. 239.

26 S. Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State*, trans. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1979).

ERRATA

Two sins of omission occurred in the Autumn edition of the RUSI Journal. They were very much regretted and the RUSI apologises unreservedly to authors and readers alike.

In Field Marshal Lord Carver's article 'Twentieth Century Warriors: Political Ambitions and Military Changes' five lines were omitted between pages 64 and 65. The full paragraph should have read as follows:

"The fact that, in the case at least of the two World Wars, they lasted very much longer than anybody expected, and turned into wars of attrition, meant that, in general, all the participants were ill-prepared for what they turned out to be. In 1914 few people—Kitchener and Haig were among the few—expected a long war. There was a tendency on all sides, at sea and on land, to be over-optimistic about what could be achieved: to underestimate the enemy and all those factors which contribute to what Clausewitz called "the friction of war". But, once the war had started, those who had been airily optimistic quickly became cautious. The admirals were a good example. Their unrealistic schemes of sailing the Grand Fleet into the southern North Sea to force a battle with the German High Seas Fleet, and the even more fantastic one of landing a force on Germany's Baltic coast, were quickly dropped in the face of the threat from submarines, torpedo-firing craft and mines. The generals' idea, expressed in the 1907 Field Service Regulations, largely the work of Haig, that the cavalry would discover the strength and disposition of the enemy, whereupon the Commander-in-Chief would decide whether or not to offer battle, was roughly proved out of date by the events in France and Belgium in 1914. Much the same could be said of the Air Marshals in 1939. Their claims for what a strategic bombing force could achieve were fantastically unrealistic, as they were forced to accept, when war came, that they could not even hit their targets, let alone seriously affect either the enemy's will or his production of war material."

In General Sir Martin Farndale's article 'The Operational Level of Command' the sentence between pages 25 and 26 should have read:

"Thanks to the work initiated by my predecessor as COMNORTHAG we do have a single concept, agreed by the nations."