

## **BRITISH COMMISSION FOR MARITIME HISTORY**

### **New Researchers in Maritime History Conference**

**University of Exeter**  
**12-13 March 2010**

#### **Abstracts of papers**

**Timothy DANIELS (California)**

*To Obstruct and Intercept": The Operations of the English Navy in the Months Before the First English Civil War*

This paper explores the importance of the English Navy in the context of the beginning of the First English Civil War. During July and August, 1642, the fleet was responsible for intercepting ships coming from the continent to England and Ireland. These ships held men, money, horses, supplies, arms and ammunition. They also conveyed correspondence between Charles and his allies on the continent, most notably from his wife, Henrietta Maria. By vigilantly patrolling the waters around England the navy limited supplies to the king and increased parliament's store of munitions. This discouraged royalists, foreign merchants and governments sympathetic to Charles's cause from risking the loss of their ships to the parliamentary fleet. At home, the fleet captured the last ships loyal to Charles. Various parliamentary vessels played instrumental roles in relieving royalist sieges of important parliamentary strongholds, and others were able to perform offensive roles in sieges by blockading royalist ports. Notably in Portsmouth several naval captains and their men played key parts in returning the city to parliament's hands after its governor had declared for the king. All of these actions, in conjunction with decisions made by parliament about the fleet and its men and decisions and strategies developed and employed by Robert Rich, second Earl of Warwick, and Admiral of the parliamentary fleet, show that control of the sea was one of the most important factors in the early stages of the war and actually helped to make war more likely; they also foreshadowed the long-lasting effects of those actions, which eventually led to a total parliamentary victory.

**Sarah KINKEL (Yale)**

*The Royal Navy and the Threat of Imperial Failure in the Seven Years War*

This paper will argue that eighteenth-century Britain was a nation divided between several competing visions of its future: it could be a continental power, it could be a colonial power based on territory, or it could be a colonial power based on trading. Using the 1757 Byng court martial and the hysteria surrounding it, the paper will examine the diverse roles the Navy was imagined to play in those various futures. The Navy was not universally supported and, based on its successes or failures, could be as quickly reviled as revered.

In both 1727 and 1739, merchants and traders to the American colonies had pushed for a war which would assure Britain's dominance there. Both times, they found their efforts thwarted by the administration: first by a hasty peace and second by a shift to a continental war. In the 1750s, those who believed Britain's future lay with the colonies once again saw themselves with an opportunity to take the empire they dreamed of, and they knew that the Royal Navy would have to play an absolutely essential role. Thus, when Admiral Byng was charged with the loss of Minorca, some panicked, fearing it was a sign that the Navy was not up to the task. Some saw 1727 and 1739 being repeated: they believed that the administration was betraying Britain's future by ignoring the support system necessary for sea power. Those with continental interests took it as an opportunity to point out that the Navy was not to be relied upon. These differing reactions to Byng's court martial revealed the insecurity and fragility that lay at the heart of Britain's imperial project and combined to create an incendiary environment filled with riots, pamphlet wars, and effigy burnings. Byng was caught in a cross-current of the imperial tensions which divided British society in the years leading up to the Seven Years War.

**Michael HUMPHRIES (King's College London)**

*The Society of Islanders and the 'Two Keels for One' naval policy, 1910-1914*

In March 1909 the éminence grise of early twentieth century British Politics, Reginald Brett, Viscount Esher, launched a new association that was "perfectly secret and perfectly democratic". The Society of Islanders was a single-issue political lobby group devoted to the sole objective of ensuring British naval supremacy by enshrining "Two Keels for One" as official government policy. It grew rapidly and by May 1912 Fisher had written to Esher claiming he had shaken hands "with all the hundred thousand 'Islanders'", a number, even allowing for hyperbole, that easily matched the membership of the Navy League. Yet despite its size and apparent success there is barely any mention of the Society in the extensive historiography on the Anglo-German naval rivalry or in academic studies on patriotic and nationalist organisations. This paper will address whether the implementation of the Islanders' policy objective was evidence of the effectiveness of their "secret" campaigning or if it was simply coincidental to other, better-documented, factors. Pertinent to this is an assessment of whether, as Esher implied, the Islanders' lobbying had an electoral impact and if it was instrumental in converting previously sceptical politicians, such as Churchill, to support of the "Two Keels for One" policy. On a broader perspective the paper initially will consider if the success of such a political tactic, focusing on this single policy objective, actually hindered a wider and more nuanced debate on the appropriate structure of the Royal Navy by overly concentrating public attention on the pace of dreadnought construction.

**Anna CARLSSON-HYSLOP (Manchester)**

*Maritime history and science: the case of Liverpool Tidal Institute and the Hydrographic Department*

Does history of science matter to maritime history, and vice versa? What can the two fields learn from each other? During this presentation I wish to discuss what links there are between maritime history and history of science.

Historians of science have recently become increasingly interested in the role of military (including naval) funding of science in twentieth century England, as well as the relations between the state, industry, military and science. Despite this increased interest in the military and science little has been done on the role of the Admiralty's Hydrographic Department even though it has been involved in a range of scientific activities, such as tidal predictions. Reidy recently discussed tidal science and its links to the Navy and the state during the early nineteenth century, but not much work has been done on twentieth century history of UK tidal science or physical oceanography. By contrast the history of US physical oceanography has been covered in some depth, with much emphasis on the importance of Navy patronage.

My presentation will discuss twentieth century links between the Hydrographic Department and tidal science at the Liverpool Tidal Institute (TI), established in 1919. The Hydrographic Department became one of TI's most important patrons (together with the shipping industry) and they collaborated not only on scientific work on astronomical tides but also on storm surges. TI's scientific work as well as the operation of the storm surge warning system cannot be understood without reference to links between TI and the Navy.

**Robert GEAR (Hull)**

*The Impact of Technological Change on the Shetland Pelagic Fishing Industry since 1945.*

This paper examines the impact of technological changes on the Shetland pelagic fishing industry since 1945. In so doing, it addresses four themes:

1. The development of fishing gear (from drift net to seine net to pelagic trawl);
2. The associated changes in vessels;
3. The impact of these changes on catches;
4. The impact of these changes on the Shetland pelagic fishing industry

The analysis is based on evidence drawn from a variety of primary sources, including: published statistics; newspapers; and especially oral history obtained through interviews with past and present fishermen and others involved in the industry.

This research is casting light on the factors that influenced Shetland fishermen to adopt new fishing techniques (including the example of foreign fishermen); on how they adapted to these new techniques; and on the effects that the adoption of new fishing techniques (both locally and regionally) had on Shetland's pelagic fishing industry.

These findings build upon previous more general local histories (e.g. Goodlad, 1971; Nicolson, 1999) and provide a new dimension to knowledge and understanding of the development of the pelagic fisheries of the British Isles and the North Atlantic (e.g. Starkey, *England's Sea Fisheries*; Coull, *Sea Fisheries of Scotland*)

**Jeremiah DANCY (Oxford)**

*A New Look at Naval Manning: Challenging the historiography of British Naval Manpower, 1793-1801.*

British Naval manning during the French Revolutionary Wars is worth analysing in detail because the Royal Navy's success at sea was reliant on its ability to produce the manpower necessary to manoeuvre and fight Britain's ships of war. During the wars, the Royal Navy experienced an increase in manpower that reached 120,000 men in 1798. However, the effective manning of a sail driven navy required experienced men who possessed the necessary skills, strength, and agility essential to work aloft in a warship. Recruiting these men proved one of the most arduous tasks of eighteenth century naval warfare. The historiography of naval manning shows a brutal and degrading task, where pressgangs dragged landmen to sea, often using violent force to subdue them. It shows a violent ramble of men from the dregs of society as the representation of the Royal Navy's lower deck. This vision of naval history produced across a two-century historiography simply does not match the statistics of British naval manning. This paper examines the statistics of naval manning from 1793-1801 and compares it to the historiography, showing that manning the fleet was not done by haphazardly filling ships with unskilled landmen, malcontents and criminals. Though pressgangs were necessary, statistics do not show ships filled with conscripts, but rather a majority of volunteers. Had the Royal Navy been manned in the chaotic and indiscriminate manner suggested, it would likely never have seen the success it did in battle during the last great wars of the age-of-sail.

**Moira BRACKNALL (Exeter)**

*Commissioned Officers' Careers in the Royal Navy during Lord Spencer's Admiralty, 1794-1801*

This paper considers commissioned officers' promotions up to the rank of post captain during the years that Lord Spencer was First Lord of the Admiralty. The first section looks at the rules and traditions governing promotions and assesses how rigidly they were applied. The second surveys both the broad trends to be seen in careers in this period and beyond and studies a sample of officers in order to provide a more detailed view of promotions. The third and final part endeavours to arrive at an understanding of how naval patronage worked, as illustrated by Spencer's private correspondence.

It appears that the well-known rules governing young gentlemen were not broken to the extent that is often assumed and that there were also others in place to regulate promotion. Some rules were applied with some flexibility in order to

accommodate both unusual cases and the patronage system, while others, normally concerned with fitness for the job, were rarely contravened. The conflict was unusual in several ways and did not conform to the eighteenth century pattern of wartime promotions. Various circumstances conspired to produce an excess of officers, leading to increasing unemployment. As far as patronage is concerned, the most important networks were those of kinship and connections within the navy. Naval officers were by far the most numerous group writing to Spencer on such matters. Spencer's own friends and relations could expect to advance quickly but were not particularly numerically significant.

**Richard HAINES (Swansea)**

*"An embarrassment of riches?": The Significance of Crew Agreement Lists for the History of Swansea During the Nineteenth Century*

Writing in 1988, Myrvin Elis-Williams commented that 'Crew Agreement Lists [provide] an embarrassment of riches as far as source material is concerned'. Although there can be no denying the validity of this claim, relatively few scholars have undertaken a significant investigation of these sources. Even Elis-Williams himself devoted less attention to this source than one would perhaps expect, commenting that apart from the 'occasional gem, many of them make unexciting reading'. The proposed paper, however, offers a wholly new insight into using Crew Agreements as an historical source. On the basis of detailed quantitative evidence collected for a period of over 60 years, this paper argues that these sources are essential for gaining an understanding into the complex workings of port towns during the nineteenth century. While many of the conclusions which will be made will chime important chords with other port towns, the primary focus will rest with the town of Swansea in South Wales. Questions such as... 'Where did the majority of sailors who sailed from Swansea come from? How did this pattern change over time? Why did these changes occur? And, what were the effects of these changes? ... will all be discussed in depth and their relevance to the wider study of maritime history considered. That so many maritime historians are yet to utilise these sources should not detract from their overall significance, and the proposed paper will significantly develop a model which will add further colour to the profile of the nineteenth century industrial town.

**Jamie BUNTIN (Greenwich)**

*The 1925 Reduction of HM Dockyard Rosyth to 'Care and Maintenance'.*

This paper examines the decision to effectively close this dockyard within ten years of its opening. It looks at the formal and informal process behind that decision.

It gives the background to the requirement for and the construction of the first purpose built dockyard to refit the new generation of steam and steel warships of the Royal Navy. It deals with the need to create a new community and all the facilities to serve it in such an isolated site.

It looks at the post First World War period which dictated the need for economies in general. In particular, it explains the Admiralty's need to save money to enable new warship building and the construction of a new naval base/dockyard in Singapore. Rosyth was selected by the Admiralty acting in isolation and without consulting the Committee of Imperial Defence or the Cabinet prior to the official announcement. It studies the steps taken after this by the Government to show that a formal process took place to examine that decision. It reveals the efforts made to challenge the decision and address the dependency of defence policy on London and the South East.

It concludes by briefly explaining the immediate aftermath, the Second World War, the resultant Cold War and finally the present day facility which is still used by the Royal Navy and will have a major role in the assembly of the new aircraft carriers one hundred years after its conception.

**Joshua NEWTON (Cambridge)**

*War and Trade in West Africa: The Navy and the Slave Trade, 1750 – 1807*

The paper provides an account of British state participation in the transatlantic slave c. 1750 - 1807 with focus on the British chain of forts and settlements along the West African coast. It highlights the ways in which shipping and sea power, particularly the role of the navy, was crucial to the maintenance of the British slaving infrastructure in the Atlantic system that prevailed prior to the abolition of the trade. It focuses on the economic and diplomatic relationships between these states and the agents of the Royal African Company and its successor institution, as well as officers of the Royal Navy in their role as uniformed representatives of the British crown. In particular, this paper seeks to explore the changing nature of the relationship between the navy and the British slave trading industry throughout the period preceding abolition in 1807. It explores the different motivations and ideological preoccupations of individuals involved in the navy with respect to the trade, including policy-makers, officers, and individual ratings. It concludes with an examination of how abolition was received by the Navy as an institution and how its connection with the African Company was transformed by this legal imperative from Parliament.

**Ruth MANDUJANO (British Columbia)**

*The Mexican-Pacific Connection: the case of the Compañía Mexicana de Navegación del Pacífico (1884-1888)*

Mexican historiography has, for the most part, situated itself as part of a transatlantic world. Likewise, it has been a widespread academic tendency to consider that Mexico lost its Pacific connection during its War of Independence, particularly after its maritime link with the Philippines via the Manila Galleon ended in 1815. From this perspective, Mexico then veered solely towards the

Atlantic and only recently, with its 1994 incorporation to APEC, has the country finally reintegrated into the Pacific region. During the past decade or so, however, historians have begun to challenge the supposed newness of Mexican Pacific links.

My paper embraces this conceptual shift. It sustains that during the second half of the 19th century, Mexico integrated to the Pacific region due to a combination of local, regional, national, and global factors. In particular, the paper addresses the creation of the first Mexican steamship company—Compañía Mexicana de Navegación del Pacífico (CMNP)—that tried to break the monopoly of San Francisco's Pacific Mail Steamship Company in transpacific exchanges, by establishing direct commercial trips between Hong Kong and Mexican ports. Using letters from diplomats, maps and newspaper clippings found in Mexican and Hongkongese archives, I will trace the short-lived existence of the CMNP in an effort to show how the consolidation of Anglo-imperialism, industrialization and the making of nations shaped Mexico's subordinate incorporation into the Pacific world.