

## *The Influence of Museum Experience upon the writing of History*

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Naval historians in the audience will have noticed that the title of this talk parodies the title of the most influential naval history book ever written – the US admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783*, first published in 1890. Mahan traced the rise of British power through its navy and he wrote it to persuade the American government to build up the US fleet - at a time when that country had few warships. However, one of the book's unintended consequences was to influence the German Kaiser to build up the German navy – he is supposed to have kept a copy at his bedside - which challenged British naval dominance, and led to an arms race - which all came to a head in the naval battles of the First World War. It is a work of great scholarship and it remains a classic text.

You will be glad to know that I have no such ambitions for this talk! But, after working in this museum for 27 years, and subsequently having written and taught history for more than a dozen years at the University of Greenwich, and having thus spent 40 years working on the greater Greenwich campus, I wanted to outline the ways in which my experience here influenced the way I thought and wrote about the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars when I wrote *Britain against Napoleon*, published in October 2013. These two wars lasted over twenty turbulent years, with a brief fourteen-month peace between them – half the period of time that I am looking back on over my career. In my book I concentrated upon how the government machine worked and changed, and how it used Britain's industrial growth, and particularly upon how the public and private sectors cooperated. Unlike today, when this debate is ideologically driven – as in say The National Health Service - relations

between government, the City and industrialists were much closer: the threat from a common enemy over the Channel drove them together. Here is the first obvious parallel, for the Museum sits in that sometimes awkward relationship on the edge of government.

History is, in many ways, the most self-indulgent of disciplines: you chose your subject because of your interests, and your interests are formed by early influences – usually family or school. This is hardly rocket science: scratch most naval historians and you will find a naval background: Dan Baugh and John Hattendorf, for instance, served in the US Navy early in their careers: Nicholas Rodger's father was a naval officer, so was mine – and I was brought up in the shadow of the Second World War, with shortages, bombsites, sweet rationing – my first memories are of the bitter and coal-starved winter of 1947.

I thought about how historians selected their subjects in some detail when I wrote an article for the *Mariner's Mirror* Centenary issue three years ago on how the experiences in or just after the Second World War of the generation of young historians in the 1950s and 1960s – John Ehrman, Piers Mackesy, Gerald Graham, Richard Ollard and also Alan Pearsall here - directly affected the way in which they wrote in their subsequent career. The same goes for army historians, notably Sir Michael Howard, who wrote about his war experiences in his autobiography, *Captain Professor*. And there are often background influences of all sorts at work when a historian chooses a specialization. However, I do think that I because of my bureaucratic experience here I wrote a book which turned out to be very differently than if had pursued a purely academic career.

So what did I experience? Looking back over forty years of working on the Greater Greenwich campus, the principal feature has been continual and steady change – of management structures, working methods, cultural shifts. Some of changes were not immediately obvious – The computer, for instance, did not alter the way we worked for twenty years, even though I arrived at the Museum in 1974 within six months of

the first machine, when we were instantly promised the paperless office: but these supposedly revolutionary ideas were very slow to develop and it was not until the 1990s that Information Technology had any real impact on our working lives.

But the real differences came about because of the variables in the relationship of the Museum with government. Money was plentiful in the 1970s – which I might call **the Age of Expansion** – under the directorship of Basil Greenhill, who as an ex-civil servant knew his way around Whitehall. The number of staff in the Museum shot up. We were in very separate departments, and we rarely talked to other members of staff – indeed, some heads of departments, who were very powerful and independent, actively discouraged their staff from doing so – I remember that relations between the staff of the Library and Manuscripts sections were not as good as they could have been! But expansion was in the air, and Basil acquired the Brass Foundry to take the rapidly expanding collections which became available because of the rationalisation of the shipping industry at that time. Basil did well in getting hold of the Brass Foundry: ah, he said, we'll be out of there in ten years and it will become a museum of brass founding – a remark made thirty-five years ago – and the museum's collections are still there.

But the Museum was the leader in its field and was hardly challenged as few other museums had maritime collections, or if they had, interest in the sea was subsidiary to other interests. The collections at Greenwich grew without constraints, with acquisition decisions resting with the heads of departments. Greenwich's dominance was also driven by Basil's desire to takeover other institutions: the Royal Naval Museum and the *Mariner's Mirror* were on his list, among other things, and this overweening ambition was rightly resented and not forgotten.

Expansion was abruptly brought to a halt in 1980 when the annual increase of the government grant suddenly stopped, and Basil was caught on the back foot: very good at going forward, by the end of his career he did not have any appetite for radical change. The Museum closed on Mondays, there was a freeze on recruitment, but that

was about all. Neil Cossons arrived as Director in 1983 and turned us upside down in his brief tenure here: the national museums secured the Treasury's agreement that we could keep any income that we generated: and this museum switched to a fourteen-year period of charging for admission. While we earned much-needed money, we also had to make efficiency savings: and we were into the **Age of Housekeeping**. The departments were re-arranged by function rather than in the time-honoured tradition of collection-based curatorial departments. The role of the collections manager was conceived, computers began to be used extensively, large inroads were made into the very considerable cataloguing backlog and the organizational basis of the collections were changed so that they matched each other.

The drive to reorganize the management of collections had started in the United States some time before, when the Smithsonian had asked Congress for a federal grant, and congressmen had said, well okay, we will provide money if you tell us what you have got in your collections. When the Smithsonian admitted that they didn't know exactly what they held, Congress said - no money unless you find out. In my first trip to the United States in 1977 I went to see the huge, newly-built Smithsonian reserve store at Silver Hill outside Washington that Congress had agreed to fund – it was a symbol of how much things were about to change. Changing management systems was first discussed here, at about this time, as the result of some confusion: four heads of department agreed separately to make a loan of several objects to the Brighton museum for an exhibition - and four departments sent the van down transporting objects on four separate journeys: maybe, it was said, the departments should talk to each other a bit more...which was the first tentative step to centralising them by function.

The 1990s saw the greatest rate of change. Computers and the internet began at last to play a big part in the operation, though it took some time before they played a role in internal communications. The work which had been done on the collections in the eighties came into its own. But this period also saw the availability of large capital sums from the National Lottery – and we were into the **Age of Development**.

Fundraising to match these grants of Lottery money had to be developed, and Richard Ormond, Director since 1986, worked very hard with the chairman of Trustees, Lord Lewin, to raise very large sums. Neptune Court opened in 1999, followed in the next decade by the development of the Observatory and the Sammy Offer wing two years ago.

The NMM still, however, had these vast collections, which had been in store since their acquisition, and knowledge of which was increasingly available to the public through the internet. In 20 years, the overlarge collections had moved from being the museum's unique selling point to a great burden. De-acquisition became a necessity, as well as reasonably-priced and convenient storage. To have all this hidden material was politically unpopular, nor did we think it ideal. We transferred appropriate material to other museums through the Maritime Curators Group, which I started with the late Mike Stammers of the Maritime Museum in Liverpool in the early 1990s. I had a good deal to do with the rationalization of collections and, after widespread consultation, we sold the substandard and duplicate items. Many of those members of staff involved went through this process with gritted teeth, as it seemed against the idea of a museum to get rid of material. One of the few high points of a difficult period for me was when Simon Stephens, the long-serving (and still serving) ship models curator, finally admitted to me – after we had sold 250 low-grade ship models at Christie's - that fewer and high-quality items made for a better national collection.

But the stores at Kidbrooke, the Brass Foundry and the Lawrence Trading Estate were still very full and much larger projects were needed to disperse the collections - and the **Age of Partnerships** came about. After many years of trying to find a partner to display the small boat collection, finally we went in with the Maritime Museum at Falmouth which became the Lottery funded new-build National Maritime Museum Cornwall. It was a long and complex project, but it took the small boat collection out of the stores at Kidbrooke and gave it a waterfront display. The recent restoration of the Smithery at Chatham Historic Dockyard, where the ship models are housed with those of the Imperial War Museum, some of them very well displayed, and the rest in

efficient storage, is very heartening – I went down to see them a couple of months ago. The old adage that the National collection was what was in the National museum, rather than what was in the country as a whole, is rightly gone, a principle which held in the establishment of the National Historic Ships Committee. But the change of heart was helped, it seems to me, by the Maritime Curators Group, and particularly by the ease of information and images circulated by the internet.

But it is worth remembering, too, the enormous changes that have happened outside the Museum - to Greenwich and south-east London, and which have changed the Museum's view of itself. For the first twenty years of my career, Greenwich and the Park was a jewel in south-east London, surrounded by run down areas and derelict docks, with unbelievably poor communications to the rest of the capital. When I cycled down through the Park in the 1970s at the start of the working day, I could see that the loading and unloading of merchant ships was continuing in at least some of the docks across the river, the Navy was secure in the Royal Naval College where it had been for some three hundred years, the Royal Observatory had been there since the seventeenth century and the Meridian since the 1880s. The other constant factor was the hostility of Greenwich Council to anything that smacked of tourism and attracting visitors to Greenwich.

All those seemingly-permanent features have gone, with the exception of the Observatory and the Meridian - they have flourished in this global era. The coming of Greenwich University has transformed the local economy, for the Navy in the Royal Naval College had been largely insulated from the local community. The museum has changed its identity and in the galleries, the collections have, rightly and naturally, been interpreted differently and more relevantly for the twenty-first century. Now the different parts of the Museum are grouped together under the 'Royalty' brand - another institution long-gone from Greenwich. At its founding before the Second World War this Museum was to have been known as 'the National Naval and Mercantile Museum', but early in the process which led to the National Maritime Museum Act of 1934, Rudyard Kipling came up with 'National Maritime Museum'

which was adopted because it was simpler - but it was more vague. The Museum's title has never encompassed the great state naval collections which came into its care, particularly after the Second World War – pictures, ship models, ships plans, archives and more. These great collections – the best of their kind in the world – are on loan from either Greenwich Hospital or the National Archives, and are thus not the property of the Trustees - and are theoretically at the disposal of other public bodies.

But perhaps it matters less nowadays where collections are held. Increasingly a museum's reputation comes down to fast, accurate access to subject information and to the collections, now in the hands of the NMM website and the new Caird Library (and, though this is pure sentiment, how glad I am that you carried on with the name from the old Library.) If, on the website, an object or a document is authoritatively described, accurately depicted, effectively indexed and queries dealt with quickly, then a museum is doing its job. When I was searching for images for *Britain against Napoleon*, the most effective picture archive I used was the Anne S.K. Brown Collection of Military uniform at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. I have never been there, nor did I need to: high resolution images arrived on my screen in record time and – as it happened -with no reproduction fees to pay.

Now - one story of a near-disaster which changed my view of the viability of the old Caird Library for ever – and it should be remembered that what we now call the old Caird Library was purely for the use of staff when I was here for my Ph.D. in the late 1960s. I did all my research until 1971 in a small reading room very much on the lines of the new Library opened two years ago. In the late 1970s a previous member of staff in the manuscripts section, Richard Boulind (now long dead), an eccentric even among the staff in those days, was given privileged access, as a reader, to Library and Manuscript material. One day he smuggled out an eighteenth-century warship log – one of the Public Records – a pretty bulky volume, and he managed to secret it about his person when behind one of the many bookcases in the Library. We discovered this less than a minute after he had left, but in spite of sending out search parties after him, we could not find him. There followed the worst ten days of my

museum career. We searched the manuscript stacks for days afterwards to see if the log had been misplaced, for he was pretty litigious, and he would surely have called his lawyers had we accused him falsely. Eventually we were absolutely sure that he had taken it, and announced that we were going to visit his house in Norfolk. He then capitulated, and the next day brought back not only the missing volume, but a whole pile of valuable pamphlets which we did not know were missing. ('I was only borrowing them', he said) Much aware of the impossibility of making the Library secure, from that date I pressed for a new one – unsuccessfully for over twenty years – but I am doubly glad that the generation after me has succeeded and that new Caird Library is now operational: inevitably there have been teething problems which are being sorted out by Stuart Bligh and his staff, but it is a very important development. And, correctly, ex-members of staff should not have access to the new stacks!

And so, you are wondering, how does all this influence how I wrote my book – *Britain against Napoleon*? Many ideas were reflected in the political situation when I was writing the book. Tony Blair's unassailable parliamentary majority in the late 1990s looked very like William Pitt's in the early 1790s, and in both cases it led to overconfidence, un-minuted meetings and violent Cabinet disagreements. Later Pitt went into a coalition which involved compromises and strains similar to those that we read about daily. Unaccountable secret service dealings took place, the same difficulties of judging incomplete intelligence and an important military operation of doubtful legality – the attack on Copenhagen in 1807 – had obvious modern parallels - Though similarities break down two years later when Lord Castlereagh and George Canning, the Secretary of State for War and Foreign Secretary respectively, fought a duel on Putney Heath, in which Canning was wounded, the ball just missing an artery. Another inch and the political history of Britain in the early nineteenth century, and almost certainly the course of the war, would have been very different.

I think that anyone who writes my sort of history almost unconsciously positions themselves somewhere within the period they are writing about, and unquestionably in my case it was as a senior civil servant in Whitehall. (And observing my wife

Jane's career in Whitehall for thirty years undoubtedly helped this process along). The patterns of politics were eerily similar to our own day - similar debates among politicians about the number of civil servants required, and their cost, about which was the more efficient – the private or public sectors - lax government accounting and the soaring national debt. It followed, therefore, that if one viewed the Great Wars from Whitehall, then it made no sense to write a history of the naval war only, especially as there were so many combined, amphibious operations of central importance. So in the last few years, I have had to learn a lot about the history of the eighteenth-century army - with the help of a number of army history friends, some of whom, I am glad to say, are here tonight.

With the policy and intelligence assessments of central government at the core of the book, I also looked at the make up of the Cabinet teams, following the management training I had received over the years – spotting those with short attention spans, the non-finishers, or those who were brilliant but whose efforts were minimised because their lack of personal skills – the innovator Samuel Bentham, the finance expert William Huskisson or the hopeless William Windham: I won't bother you with their modern museum equivalents!

In doing so I gathered all those areas of life which are usually ignored when a war is being fought: city finance, government borrowing and taxes, the expansion of state dockyards and the ordnance, contracts with industry and technological breakthroughs, agriculture and the provisioning of the troops and navy, the chartering of huge numbers of merchant ships, shipbuilding and munitions, invasion defence and the countrywide militia and volunteers.

But apart from research into all these subjects, I brought my own experience. It is ever a museum tradition to attempt about 20% more than can comfortably be completed, and for long periods I worked long hours, always with, it seemed, a shortage of resources - and at times experienced my own stress: I haven't, for instance, mentioned the period in the early 1990s when the Museum decided to put on the Titanic

exhibition, which for me was a very difficult time, with the Museum under attack from other maritime museums on the tricky question of dealing with salvagers.

Thus the major underlying question that I asked when looking at Britain at war for those twenty years was how did those responsible for its government and its armed forces stand up to the strain and stress of war – four times the length of either of the two World Wars of the twentieth century, and against a much more powerful and richer country – or rather countries - for the French army dominated Europe and Napoleon had huge resources at his command. No-one had looked at it in this way before.

And it was quite obvious that stress (a word which has only come into common usage in the second half of my life) was everywhere. The older generation of ministers, admirals and generals fell away quickly as the strain of war wore them out. This happened rapidly: the average age of the admirals and captains at the battle of the Nile in 1798 under Nelson was ten years younger than under Howe at the Battle of the First of June - only four years earlier. The armed forces were young: the majority of the young men in the army and navy who ensured the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815 were not even born when the conflict started in 1793. Aristocrats unused to long days of toil in their offices and then in the House of Commons and House of Lords were particularly vulnerable to ill-health, especially during the strain of the intense political conflict that developed after the death of Pitt in 1806. Minister after minister retired because of illness. Gout especially took its toll. None of those who had taken a central role in the great struggle lived long lives – Liverpool and Canning died in their fifties, while of course Castlereagh committed suicide in 1822.

By the end, young men who could stand the pace got to the top extraordinarily quickly (as in the Second World War) and the older ones were retired - and a civil service wide pension scheme was introduced to facilitate this. Wellington was only 40 when he was appointed to command in the Peninsular, his senior staff officers were in their thirties and the juniors were in their twenties. Robert Peel was made

Undersecretary for War and the Colonies in 1810 at the incredibly young age of 22, while Lord Palmerston was made Secretary for War at the age of 25. The senior civil servants, such as John Wilson Croker, First Secretary of the Admiralty and John Charles Herries, who headed the army Commissariat, were of similar ages. These energetic men made radical improvements to the administration of the country and without them, and the changes that they brought about - in my judgement, Britain would not have survived the long war against Napoleon. In the last five years of the war, a period which included the assassination of the Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, it was the civil servants who kept Britain in the war – the junior politicians whom you have never heard of that kept the machine going.

And here is the final influence of my museum career on *Britain against Napoleon*. You will have noticed that I have not mentioned any of the exhibitions, which like the battles of the Great Wars, called for a concentration of effort and resources, leadership and risk taking. The approximations of the battles of the Nile, of Trafalgar and Waterloo in my time here were ‘1775’, the bicentenary of the American Revolutionary war, ‘Armada’ in 1988 and ‘Titanic’ in 1993 – these were the exhibitions which had the queues snaking around the buildings. Many others were memorable – in the same way as there were many other battles in those wars. I was never responsible for an exhibition, there were too many other talents around who did those: Richard Ormond, David Cordingly, Stephen Deuchar and David Spence, for instance. My role, just like those civil servants, was to keep everything else going: that’s why, perhaps, I did not write about battles in my book.

Nevertheless, working as a team was the only way to achieve anything. Here and there I can still see my own brush strokes in the greater picture – the Caird Fellowships and NMM support for Nicholas Rodger’s *Naval History of Britain*, now in the last stages of its third volume, a work that has taken over 20 years, the first two volumes of which have helped to define the subject. Outside the NMM the Maritime Curators Group still continues and National Historic Ships UK is the successor to those first ship preservation meetings we held in the early 1990s. The National

Maritime Museum Falmouth, I am glad to hear, is now making its own way financially. I hear that the Museum here is now looking towards a new collections centre. I wish it luck!