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The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity 1919-22

Naval and Foreign Policy under Lloyd George

G. H. Bennett



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The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity 1919–22

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For my father, who taught me to respect the Sea

Drake's Drum

*DRAKE he's in his hammock an' a thousand miles away,
(Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?)
Slung atween the round shot in Nombre Dios Bay,
An' dreamin' arl the time O' Plymouth Hoe.
Yarnder lumes the Island, yarnder lie the ships,
Wi' sailor lads a-dancing' heel-an'-toe,
An' the shore-lights flashin', an' the night-tide dashin',
He see et arl so plainly as he saw et long ago.
Drake he was a Devon man, an' ruled the Devon seas,
(Capten, art tha' sleepin' there below?)*

*Roving' tho' his death fell, he went wi' heart at ease,
A' dreamin' arl the time o' Plymouth Hoe.
'Take my drum to England, hang et by the shore,
Strike et when your powder's runnin' low;
If the Dons sight Devon, I'll quit the port o' Heaven,
An' drum them up the Channel as we drumm'd them long ago'.
Drake he's in his hammock till the great Armadas come,
(Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?)*

*Slung atween the round shot, listenin' for the drum,
An' dreamin arl the time o' Plymouth Hoe.
Call him on the deep sea, call him up the Sound,
Call him when ye sail to meet the foe;
Where the old trade's plyin' an' the old flag flyin'
They shall find him ware and wakin', as they found him long ago!*

Sir Henry Newbolt (1862–1938)

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Preface

This book seeks to do three things: to advance, in the preface, a concept of the interconnectedness of naval policy; to propose, in the introduction, a potential case study focusing on naval policy in the period 1919–22; and then to explore that interconnectedness, as a means to demonstrate the concept, in subsequent chapters. It concludes with an examination of the repercussions of failure to successfully balance the different forces at play in naval policy and the importance of the relationships in the senior ranks of the Royal Navy between those who have to lead a service critically affected by British defence policy. The concept which this book seeks to advance stems from the processes, complexities and impacts of the building of complex warships as part of national defence. The building of warships depends on a network of relationships within the Royal Navy, between the naval service and government, between different branches of government, between the government and private sector and between the private sector and the communities which provide those employees. Those employees are, at the same time, voters and their political representatives have the capacity to affect government decision-making, while business leaders have the capacity to intercede with politicians, civil service and naval officers. Naval policy thus embraces both high and low politics, industrial relations and economic policy. The nexus of overlapping relationships at play in this field extends the importance, influence and impact of naval policy well beyond the realms of defence policy. The importance of naval policy as a significant force in wider national history has not been fully recognized by historians. The maritime element underpins the history of the British Isles and is indivisible from any wider historical analysis.

The elements of this concept of interconnectedness were fully evident in the defence policy of the Conservative–Liberal government headed by David Cameron from 2010 to 2015. On 17 July 2014 the 65,000-ton aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth* left the dry dock at Rosyth, where her prefabricated sections had been brought together for final assembly. She had been officially named on 4 July by Queen Elizabeth II in a ceremony attended by David Cameron, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and Alex Salmond, First Minister of Scotland and Leader of the Scottish Nationalist Party. With the dry dock clear,

work would begin on the construction of HMS *Prince of Wales*, sister ship to HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. The prefabricated sections of the largest vessels ever built for the Royal Navy had been constructed at different yards around the United Kingdom to spread the economic benefits of the construction programme. Once in service HMS *Queen Elizabeth* would become the Royal Navy's capital ship for the twenty-first century: the largest and most effective weapons system in service with that force.

The politics of building the new generation of British aircraft carriers were particularly evident at the naming ceremony. Vital to British global power projection in the twenty-first century, the aircraft carriers would provide conventional military underpinning for national foreign policy. In the battle for government funding between the military services, the carriers represented an important success for the Royal Navy in securing long-term capabilities. On coming to office in the midst of an economic depression in 2010, the Conservative–Liberal coalition government had announced its desire to cancel the construction programme for at least one of the carriers, in the interests of national economy, only for it to emerge that the contracts for the ships had been structured in such a way as to make it less costly to proceed with their construction than fall foul of cancellation clauses. Other economic risks were also apparent. In 2010 Prime Minister Cameron was warned that cancelling one aircraft carrier would lead to the closure of three shipyards by 2013, the direct loss of 5,000 jobs and a considerably larger number of layoffs through indirect effects. Effectively, the outgoing Labour government of Gordon Brown had managed to tie the hands of the Cameron coalition to a programme that it otherwise felt it could not afford.¹

A further level of political game playing around the new carriers was added by the prospect of a vote on Scottish independence from the United Kingdom in September 2014. Threatening the dissolution of a state that had survived two world wars, the importance to Rosyth and the wider Scottish economy of the contracts to build the aircraft carriers were key reference points in the political debate which began to grow as the first carrier neared completion. With the Royal Navy signalling that independence would rule out any future contracts for Scottish yards to provide its warships, the politics of shipbuilding were once again very evident. Warships required builders, bringing profits to firms, giving jobs to workers (directly and indirectly), building prosperity in towns and cities and ultimately bringing a political reward to the parties and governments which could take the credit for awarding contracts and supporting shipbuilding and allied trades. In their report of the naming ceremony the BBC estimated that

some 10,000 workers, and over 100 companies, had worked on the building of HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and that the total value of the commercial contracts coming out of the aircraft carrier programme was worth an estimated £6.2 billion.² In stark economic terms the BBC drew attention to the essential set of relationships involved in naval policy and warship building.

The Financial Times, in its coverage of the naming ceremony, gave particular emphasis to the politics and symbolism at play in the event. Under the headline 'Warship sails into the defence of the UK', it revealed how during the ceremony dockyard workers had begun to boo when images of Alex Salmond (campaign leader for Scottish independence) appeared on a large video screen.³ One dockyard worker was quoted as saying: 'They won't build complex warships outside UK sovereign territory... They haven't done that since the Second World War. If I voted for independence, I would be voting myself out of job. The majority of workers at the yard feel the same way.'⁴ The potential social and economic damage to an independent Scotland of an end to building warships for the Royal Navy at Rosyth constituted a potent political threat to specific communities in an independent Scotland.

The launching of HMS *Queen Elizabeth* in 2014 was the first key stage in addressing a critical gap in national defences. That gap had opened up with the political games that had followed the advent of the Cameron government in 2010. It came into office amidst an international slump and economic difficulties at home. As the incoming government reviewed national security, the real priority of ministers was the state of the economy and a national deficit threatening bankruptcy.⁵ Essential issues of national security were disregarded as politicians focused on political and economic imperatives. Under the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) ships, tanks and aircraft were sold for scrap value, military personnel fired and vital elements of Britain's defence capabilities dismantled in the rush for national economy.⁶ Meanwhile, in a politically calculated move, state funding of free television licences, free bus passes and winter fuel allowances for Britain's senior citizens was retained.

One of the most significant aspects of SDSR 2010 was the scrapping of Britain's existing 'Invincible class' aircraft carriers and the harrier aircraft that operated from them. Britain would have no aircraft carriers until the entry into service of HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Prince of Wales*. Without carrier-borne aircraft, Britain would be forced to rely on good fortune that emergencies would not occur in parts of the world where the Royal Air Force would find it difficult to operate. It was a political gamble based on hope rather than realpolitik – the stupidity of which would soon be highlighted by the rise of

Islamic State in the Middle East, and a resurgent Russia able and willing to throw its weight around in international affairs. The decisions taken in 2010 constituted a serious military risk, condemning UK forces in the short and medium terms to have to conduct military operations without the potential for their own carrier support, including conducting large-scale operations against Islamic State and keeping Russian submarines out of UK territorial waters. Some, such as Geoffrey Till, considered that it was a gamble necessary to secure by the third decade of the twenty-first century a transformed and re-equipped Royal Navy in the front line of world navies.⁷ Beyond potential terrorist threats from Islamic fundamentalist groups, the activities of organized crime and long-term dangers posed by climate change, ministers in 2010 saw no serious threats to UK national security requiring the deployment of large-scale conventional military forces. They therefore concluded that it was not essential to maintain those forces at existing levels.

Following SDSR 2010 as ministers argued over the need for HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Prince of Wales*, the game of political football continued. Different ministers and departments, and external businesses, sought to influence the construction and kit that would go into the aircraft carriers and the lucrative contracts that would flow from them. In turn that led to changes, and then further changes, in their specification which increased their cost markedly and unnecessarily, and ensured that the Royal Navy would have less capable means of power projection at an inflated price.⁸ SDSR 2010 and what followed from it were not good advertisements for the processes of Westminster government. SDSR 2015, unveiled in November of that year, had to quietly set about rebuilding the capabilities which had been jettisoned in 2010.⁹

To many observers of the history of the Royal Navy the 2010 process and its aftermath were reminiscent of Sir John Nott's infamous 'Defence Review' of 1981, which, with its plans for drastic cuts in the surface fleet, was publicly condemned by the Royal Navy as more about the economic imperatives of the Thatcher government than about the military needs of the country. Within twelve months of publication in June 1981 the review was being publicly and widely blamed as a contributory factor in Argentina's decision to seize British sovereign territory in South Georgia and the Falkland Islands. First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Henry Leach commented at the time of the resulting war that the Nott review had been 'done in a hurry, involved pre-judgement, and was driven by short term politico-economic expediency'.¹⁰ The 1982 Falklands war cost the lives of 255 British service personnel, and the sweeping cuts to the Royal Navy's surface fleet were quietly halted in favour of a more gradual dwindling.

The same government which had helped to cause the war by its naval policy reaped the electoral fruits of victory with a landslide win in the 1983 general election.

The war did at least, as British singer Elvis Costello identified in his ironic hit 45 rpm record 'Shipbuilding', bring much needed relief to the British shipbuilding industry and its related communities hard hit by the Thatcher recession. With a record sleeve featuring images from Stanley Spencer's series of eight paintings *Shipbuilding on the Clyde*, depicting scenes from the Glasgow shipyards in the 1940s, the song rose to number 35 in the United Kingdom singles chart. The song was an ironic lament about the policies of the Thatcher government, and a reminder of the links between the fortunes of the Royal Navy, the industry which provided its ships and the working-class communities which built them. It also evoked the sense that those communities, and that industry, were as expendable as the sailors and soldiers called on to lay down their lives to redress the mistakes of politicians.¹¹ More than thirty years later, as the repercussions of SDSR 2010 became manifest, to some observers the song continued to retain its charge as the politicians continued to make avoidable mistakes, and to make decisions based on political considerations rather than what was in the security interests of the country.

Naval policy and the issues which flow from it are inherently and inextricably part of the political economy of the United Kingdom, and have been so for the past hundred years or more. That unchanging fact has been too easily overlooked by most maritime historians and those who might be called 'professional naval pundits'. Even those who use the term 'political economy' do not probe the full wealth of interconnections at play in decision-making about defence, but the connections are there to be traced and analysed. Those interconnections take the reach of naval policy well beyond the realms of the Ministry of Defence. It touches the economy, local and national politics, business, communities and a vast network of relationships. This book demonstrates this concept of interconnectedness by an analysis of naval policy in the period from 1919 to 1922, but it can be glimpsed across British history from the 1700s onwards.

For example, in December 1944, seventy years before the naming ceremony for HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, a young Princess Elizabeth had launched HMS *Vanguard* on the Clyde River.¹² The last of Britain's battleships, she had been the capital ship of her day. Like the launching of HMS *Queen Elizabeth* in 2014 the event combined international politics with naval policy, employment, regional prosperity and national politics all wrapped in symbolism. The launch took place on the day of Scotland's patron saint, St Andrew, with the future Queen's

personal standard flying overhead. At the end of a long war, with hopes and fears for a future that would be dominated by cold war and nuclear threat, and with an electorate that had shifted firmly to the left, the launch was an affirmation of a set of relationships that had been tested by the Second World War in a generation, just as the launch of HMS *Queen Elizabeth* in 2014 would involve an assertion of the value of a relationship over three hundred years old.

For the working-class communities on the Clyde the unspoken backdrop to the launch of HMS *Vanguard* in 1945 and HMS *Queen Elizabeth* in 2014 was less happy days, in the aftermath of the First World War, when orders had declined for British shipbuilders on the Clyde, Tyneside and Merseyside. The lack of orders brought joblessness, dole and despair to families and destroyed whole communities. What started in the 1920s intensified in the early to mid-1930s and was only brought to an end by the approach of war after 1937. The events of the post-war period continue to cast long shadows on the shipbuilding industry and the regions which depend on it. The celebrations of 2014 and 1945 took place against the memories of leaner times, and concerns and hopes for the future evolution of British naval policy with its capacity to make or break the communities that live or die by shipbuilding.¹³ In this most traditional industry the policy linkages, the high and low politics and patterns of business and regional boom and bust can be glimpsed repeating themselves across the past hundred years and beyond.

In this context, this book offers an analysis of naval policy in the period 1919–22: an earlier age of austerity than the one in which we find ourselves in the second decade of the twenty-first century. During the years after the First World War, as the Royal Navy identified Japan as its likely opponent in a future naval war, the British government was forced to ‘tighten its belt’ and cut back on naval expenditure in the interests of ‘National Economy’. The central argument of the book is that the same kind of connections between naval and foreign policy (what a nation can and cannot do), the provision of ships for the Royal Navy, business and regional prosperity and employment were just as evident after the First World War as they are in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century. Furthermore, at a series of levels, naval policy was grist to the mill of politics: international politics between naval powers; Whitehall interdepartmental politics; the politics of coalition government, with Conservative and Liberal ministers vying with each other over budgets and influence; the politics of the English and Scottish regions; and the politics of prosperity and jobs. One hundred years on from the end of the First World War history, as least so far as naval policy is concerned, is to some extent repeating itself.

In covering its subject matter this book will engage with a series of important historiographical debates relating to: the history of the Royal Navy, the failures of British defence policy in the interwar period, the evolution of British foreign policy after 1919, British economic and industrial history and the nation's social and cultural history in the aftermath of the First World War. For example, one particularly important, and yet easily overlooked, aspect of Britain's external relations in the 1919 to 1922 period concerns the extent to which the political debate was influenced by concerns about the emergence of socialism as a political force, and the possibilities that the labour movement might grow into the main opposition to the Conservative Party. In *The Impact of Labour* Maurice Cowling has written that for the Conservative Party from early 1920 onwards the rise of the Labour Party, and what to do about it, was 'the major problem' in British politics.¹⁴ That problem became increasingly central to every political calculation. The emergence of the modern Labour Party, the decline of the Liberals and the reinvention of the Conservative Party were vital political processes in play in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, but how far did this intrude into the field of defence politics? Was there some consideration and calculation about how naval policy might impact on the battle between the Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties in key regions and cities? Sound national finances, responsible and honest government and national security (with a strong Royal Navy) were the key elements in the identity of the Conservative Party as it struggled to redefine itself after almost twenty years in opposition or in coalition under a Liberal leader.¹⁵ Also for the Conservative Party were there rather more nebulous and inchoate considerations about what kind of socialism might constitute their future opposition? Was it to be the potentially revolutionary politics of Red Clydeside or that of a moderate union movement and Labour Party?

Asking and answering questions such as these is an essential aspect of this book. It adopts a multifaceted approach rooted in political and naval history but opening up new and cutting-edge debates in other areas of historical study to transform traditional debates. As we have seen, history has a habit of repeating itself and the politics and political economy of British naval policy has scarcely changed in the century between 1914 and 2014. We have been here before, and we will be here again, unless we better understand the processes, personalities and politics at work in naval policy – this demands a joined-up approach, linking different areas of historical study. These linkages are starkly absent from much of the writing on naval history and British history in the 1919–22 period. As a discipline history excels in imposing divisions, or creating watertight

compartments, within the overall passage of events. To the chronological divisions formed by the coming and going of different administrations in Westminster are added the disciplinary bulkheads of political, naval, military, economic, business, social, gender and labour history. The wider patterns and linkages are lost, and as much as this book is a contribution to the understanding of naval policy after the First World War, it is also a contribution to what might be labelled total history. Its significance is not only factual but methodological.

In terms of naval history as a sub-discipline it heeds Volker Berghahn's plea to reject the 'primacy of foreign policy' approach and to 'advance toward more sophisticated approaches that incorporate domestic factors'.¹⁶ This book also accepts John Sumida's argument that navies 'are not only social entities but strategic, tactical, logistical, technical, economic, financial and administrative entities as well. Social and cultural factors might be the dominant factors in determining the outcome of a particular decision, but they are never the only agents at play'.¹⁷ Similarly from the field of political science the book recognizes the validity of Samuel P. Huntington's complaint that 'analyses of strategy at times seem to assume that politics sets no limits on the military policies which the government can pursue'.¹⁸ In accepting these points this book seeks to draw together the historiography and understandings from the sub-disciplines covering the history of this period in order to examine the interconnections at work in naval policy, and to highlight the repercussions over the course of the following twenty years of the decisions and understandings arrived at between 1919 and 1922. By bringing these strands together this book will offer an innovative reading of naval policy during this period, and offer a methodology for the reading of British defence policy in the twentieth century and beyond.

In respect of naval history, and especially because of the parallels which this book seeks to draw, one point in particular needs to be addressed at the outset. Playing an important role in the writing of modern naval history have been figures such as Captain S.W. Roskill, Samuel Eliot Morison and others with close associations to professional navies. Their work has sometimes been seen as history dressed in the form of a case for continued expenditure on navies. The same prejudices among the historical community have extended to the work of civilian academics who work in the field of War Studies, or establishments linked to the Ministry of Defence. Writers of naval history in the most humble and pacific universities can find themselves tarred with the same brush. For example, David Edgerton has charged Paul Kennedy in his narrative on *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* with wanting 'a navy kept at 1918 levels with 1914 levels of shipbuilding, rather than one adjusted to a peacetime standard

devised in comparison with other navies'.¹⁹ Such comments can be interpreted as value laden and indicative of a wider prejudice within academe.

It is remarkable, and a highly retrograde impulse, that in the early twenty-first century any part of human existence and endeavour might be considered to lie outside the purview of the historians. In an editorial in the *International Journal of Naval History* in 2009 Dr Gary Weir wrote as follows: 'Many university settings reject the study of military and naval history as characteristic of a violent aspect of our society that somehow promotes the armed forces rather than informs. It seems as if some places devoted to scholarship seek to study a world in which navies do not exist.'²⁰ Andrew Lambert, Laughton professor of Naval History, defined the problem in a British context: 'The key problem is that naval history operates in two distinct fields. Although developed to educate navies it has adopted and applied the methods of the historical profession. The close link with navies makes it an unwelcome presence in academic departments that equate the study of war with its promotion.'²¹

In writing naval history it does not automatically follow that by analysing and charting the decline of the Royal Navy one becomes a propagandist for naval arms and national navies. Nor does it follow that there is anything untoward if one considers that the personnel and material available to the Royal Navy leave it inadequate to the tasks placed upon it, or which might be placed upon it in the light of international events. Ships' crews are societies in miniature encased in wood or steel. Seamen and sea women are extensions of the larger society that they serve. The human tragedy of crews sent into combat in second-rate ships, or which are overwhelmed by the elements, breeds no militarism.

Likewise it is a geographical fact that Britain is an island, and that its national evolution has been deeply affected by the nation's relationship with the sea. The oceans contain the planet's most complex eco-systems and have been a place of scientific discovery and economic endeavour. Navies have played their role in that story. With two-thirds of the world's surface covered by water, and Britain dependent on the sea for 90 per cent of its imports, the Royal and Merchant Navies have been a vital part of British and international history. They remain so, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. Questions around the dilemmas which Britain faced a hundred years ago, and the impact of the decisions taken in response, remain remarkably current. Britain needs a critical naval history informed by the other sub-disciplines of history with which this book engages.

With the decision-making of politicians, civil servants and, indeed, admirals, the wisdom or error of their thoughts often becomes clear a decade or more later.

Today that time lag may be even longer. In 1919 a new capital ship was expected to have a life of twenty years: in the twenty-first century HMS *Queen Elizabeth* is considered good for half a century. The commanding officers of HMS *Queen Elizabeth* in her closing years in the latter twenty-first century have not yet been born. Decisions affecting naval policy thus cast long shadows across futures yet shrouded in darkness, and as Kipling noted in 1893 (echoed in sentiment by Elvis Costello in 1982), blood is the ultimate price of Admiralty when they go wrong.²²

Acknowledgements

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In this endeavour there are many people and institutions that have assisted my research over the past twenty years. My colleagues at Plymouth University (those still active, those who are retired and those who are no longer with us) have invariably been a great help. In this context I would especially like to thank Dr Jonathan Mackintosh whose hard work and ideas led to Daiwa's decision to hold the symposium in Drake's hometown. Daiwa have been very supportive and I would also like to pay tribute to them and to the invaluable work that they do in bringing together two peoples on opposite sides of the globe.

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in responding to author queries than they were twenty years ago. In the case of any omission, if the copyright holder would like to contact me, care of the publisher, we will see that due acknowledgement is given in any future edition of the book.

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Introduction

From 1919 to 1922 the makers of British naval policy faced particularly acute difficulties in struggling to balance the different and interconnected forces at play within it. In late 1919, at the end of a long and very costly war, the Royal Navy began to turn its attention to the next war – a war which would probably be fought in the Pacific with Japan as the likely opponent. It would be a war in which the Royal Navy would have quantitative and probably qualitative superiority, and the conflict would be decided not necessarily by a clash of main battle fleets, but rather by the economic strangulation of a Japanese economy heavily dependent on imports of raw materials, and the export of finished goods.¹ At the same time, the Royal Navy would maintain the freedom of the seas for British trade, or more particularly the strategic sea lanes which ran from North America to Britain, from Britain through the Eastern Mediterranean, from the Suez Canal to India and onwards into the Pacific to link Australia and New Zealand to the heart of the imperial superhighway across the oceans. Irrespective of war or peace, this was the highway which served to tie together a rather ramshackle and disparate Empire, and off from it branched connections to British possessions in Africa, the Pacific and the Far East. The Empire depended on a main maritime artery protected by the Royal Navy and by bastions such as Gibraltar, Alexandria and Trincomalee.

Naval dominance was a touchstone for the British imperial identity. Any power seeking to rival Britain on the high seas was a threat to that Empire and to British home islands equally as dependent as Japan on a continuing flow of imports and exports. With projections of a rapid increase in Japanese naval power after the First World War, it was inevitable that the Royal Navy should attempt to respond to a potential threat to the security of the Empire. As Christopher M. Bell has detailed, during the interwar period, planning for a future naval conflict against Japan would occupy the attention of the senior levels of the Senior Service far more than the threats from Germany, Italy and other nations.² The Royal Navy had a clear strategic vision of the war which was

to come against the Japanese, but ironically when that conflict arrived in 1941, it lacked the means to execute its strategy and to prosecute the naval war against Japan. That would have to be left to the US Navy. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the unity of the British Empire would be undermined as the Royal Navy was driven from the East and Japanese forces would overrun large sections of the British Empire to leave the Japanese Army by 1942 contemplating invasions of Australia and India. It would not be until 1945 that a British Fleet in the Pacific, working with the Americans, would begin to carry the fight towards the Japanese home islands.

There were many reasons for the failure of British strategy against the Japanese which sought to contain and, if need be, strangle the Japanese naval threat to the Empire. These reasons included the slow pace of British rearmament in the late 1930s, and the fact that from mid-1940 to mid-1941 Britain stood alone in war against Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Nevertheless, the miscarrying of the strategy to deal with Japan was disastrous for those sailors, soldiers, airmen and civilians caught in the path of the Japanese military after 1941, and for an empire that was perhaps fatally compromised by the success of Japanese arms in 1941–42. The process of decolonization, of wholesale withdrawal from the Empire, would begin hard on the heels of Japanese defeat in 1945. It was scarce wonder that after 1945 the Empire broke up with astonishing speed. The protective shield of the Royal Navy was the principal benefit to the dominions and colonies of the imperial relationship, and the events of the war had fatally compromised the partnership. On this reading British naval policy in the interwar period assumes great significance. Did the problems begin in 1919, the point at which the Empire reached its apogee and the Royal Navy identified the Imperial Japanese Navy as its most likely next opponent in a major naval war? Was this the moment when naval dominance was sacrificed, when things went wrong in aligning the Royal Navy for ‘The Shape of Things to Come’, and the mother country failed in preparing the Empire for its gravest test?

This book examines the evolution of British naval and foreign policy in the period 1919–22 – the period of the Lloyd George coalition government. This is the point at which the need to contain Japan was identified, and the Royal Navy began to make its case to the government to secure the resources to effect an appropriate strategy to deal with that threat. How was this danger represented to the politicians? What assets did the Royal Navy possess in trying to secure Cabinet agreement on providing the resources to meet the threat? How did the public view the Royal Navy, the recent war and the challenges of the future? These are some of the questions which this book will address.

In doing so, this book seeks to contribute to the historiography on the Royal Navy, British defence policy and the outbreak of the Second World War, which has been dominated by perceptions that things really began to go badly wrong with British defence policy in the 1930s with the appeasement-inclined politicians of the National Government. Few historians have been prepared to go along wholly with Lord Chatfield's assessment that, by the end of the 1920s, the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry had been handed over by the politicians to the financial Gestapo constituted by the Treasury.³ Against a post-war historiographical consensus framed by publication in 1940 of Cato's *Guilty Men*, which argued that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary Halifax and others were the architects of appeasement and national disgrace in the 1930s, Chatfield's comments made little impression until historians such as John Ferris and Christopher M. Bell re-examined defence policy of the 1920s.⁴

In 1919 conjuring up a threat of future war with a power which hitherto had been on friendly terms with Great Britain was the automatic response of a service which in the course of the hundred years between 1815 and 1919 had achieved and had slowly begun to lose naval supremacy: the ability to dominate the fleets of other powers on the surface of the world's oceans. Throughout that century the Royal Navy had maintained a close watch on the progress of the navies of rival powers. Britain's naval dominance was never as total, or as unproblematic, as British public opinion was ready to believe in the nineteenth century, and the Royal Navy maintained constant vigilance looking for the next threat to peace and assessing the balance of power at sea. No power on earth could ever truly dominate the oceans on a continuous basis, and on a number of occasions throughout the nineteenth century, rapid technological change had threatened the British battle fleet with immediate or projected obsolescence.

In 1919 threats, and potential threats, to Britain's maritime security could not and would not be taken for granted, and this was accepted by politicians. The Navy's prestige was invariably high: its superiority (material and human) was widely endorsed by a public to whom Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805 was testament to British genius, pluck and god-granted fortune. The Navy received patronage and favour from the royal family, and Parliament, in the lead up to 1914, had been ready to vote the naval estimates to ensure the continuance of British maritime strength. Britain's naval power made her a state to be feared, to be courted and to be emulated. Victory over the Central Powers in the war of 1914–18 owed much to the ability of the Royal Navy to mount an economic blockade, and to bring to the land battle the resources of a global empire without interruption by enemy naval units that had been contained or destroyed. The

surrender of the German High Seas Fleet in 1918, and its scuttling in Scapa Flow in 1919, seemed to affirm continued British dominance over the world's oceans. Only the Imperial Japanese and US navies could challenge the position of the Royal Navy as the guardian of the world's oceans. However, within three years of the scuttling of the Kaiser's fleet, the Royal Navy, or at least the British government, had agreed to surrender Britain's unqualified position as the premier naval power. How did this happen and what were the consequences?

During the years from 1919 to 1922, and in the naval and foreign policies of Lloyd George's peacetime government, there was a coming together into a perfect policy storm of a series of factors (long and short term) that forced decisions that would have far-reaching consequences for the Royal Navy and the nation it served. Those factors varied greatly and this book will range widely in terms of both their chronology and its composite themes. As Duncan Redford correctly observes, 'The complexities of British naval policy, operations, administration, technology and finance defy the tidy grouping of research into discrete chronological boundaries; in many ways the Navy's contemporary history can best be seen as the cumulative effect of previous successes and failures of naval and defence policy.'⁵

Britain's naval dominance had undoubtedly been a long time in the making, but it was a very short time in the ceding. The rise had been based on a series of long-term developments. The Industrial Revolution had provided a very advanced and prosperous economy, especially in such key industries as steel production, coalmining, engineering and shipbuilding. As an island nation, unencumbered by alliances, Britain had been able to invest in sea power rather than pay for the huge armies needed by continental powers to defend their borders. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British Empire had extended into Africa and Asia. The Empire with its interconnecting trade routes provided a worldwide network of bases and coaling stations which provided the necessary infrastructure for Britain to project its power on a global basis through the Royal Navy. The Navy was backed by the world's largest merchant fleet which brought Britain such dominance in world trade that politicians, businesspersons and public opinion were all keenly aware of the importance of maritime matters. The merchant fleet also provided a large pool of experienced seamen who could be called upon in any emergency. As vital national assets the Empire and merchant fleets required protection and support in all parts of the world, and the Royal Navy had the capability and flexibility to deliver that protection and support wherever ships could navigate. Just as importantly, the lessons of history and national pride ensured that the Royal Navy enjoyed a considerable measure of prestige in British culture and the nation's affections.

Effectively there was work for the Royal Navy to do which could not be carried out by any other means, and the country had the industrial infrastructure to produce the necessary ships and keep up with new developments such as the transitions from sail to steam propulsion and from wood to steel construction. The British economy was prosperous enough to finance the high cost of the service, and public opinion (led by the socio-political elite of industrial society) was prepared to accept the cost. As the franchise steadily widened in Britain during the nineteenth century, this factor became steadily more important. Overall during the nineteenth century the cultural capital of the Royal Navy with the British voter and taxpayer remained high, but it was a fluctuating relationship that had its peaks and its troughs. The centenary anniversary of Trafalgar in 1905 (one of the peaks) underlined the public's powerful support for the Royal Navy, but by this stage some of the bases of British economic power, and the ability to sustain a strong Royal Navy, were coming under strain.

The signature of an Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902, and steadily closer relations with France in the face of an increasingly aggressive German foreign policy, highlighted growing British concerns in the Edwardian era about national security and the balance of power in Europe and Asia. Those factors which had given rise to Britain's naval dominance began to slip away in the approach to the outbreak of war in 1914. From maintaining a British Fleet capable of beating a combination of the next two largest fleets in the nineteenth century, the Royal Navy by 1914 was forced to accept a 60 per cent margin of superiority over the German Navy. By the end of a ruinous war that shook the Empire to its foundations, dislocating the production of staple industries (shipbuilding, steel and coal production), and leaving Britain massively in debt to the United States, Britain could not maintain the size of navy that imperial security and the rhetoric of empire appeared to demand.

The war had also raised industrial and political challenges that abutted the key issue of the size of the British Fleet. The effectiveness of submarines, mines and torpedoes had been demonstrated. Similarly the conflict had highlighted the potential of airpower (land-based and maritime). Some wondered by 1919 whether the battleship, the spiritual if not technological descendent of Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar, had had its day. Did the future belong to rapidly evolving and less costly weapons systems rather than the leviathans that had formed line of battle at Jutland? What might this mean for the future of warfare and the strategy of an island nation with its far-flung Empire? Building battleships required a major investment that Britain could ill-afford. To invest in a system on the verge of obsolescence was unthinkable. However, not to build battleships would further

impact on the staple industries of iron and steel production and shipbuilding, which were seemingly in long-term inexorable decline. Without fresh orders firms would not maintain the specialist facilities for warship building, thereby decreasing the industrial potential of strategic British industries. This would, in turn, increase unemployment, particularly in the industrial North of England and in Scotland. Union militancy might increase, fuelling the growth of the Labour Party and more militant forms of socialism. The issue of the battleship and the strength of the Royal Navy touched a range of domestic issues as well as the culture and identity of the nation and empire.

There were also foreign policy implications. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, signed in 1902, was once again up for renewal in 1921, and the American government was critically concerned about Japanese policies and intentions. During the war, both Japan and the United States had initiated large programmes for the building of warships. Those fleets threatened to outnumber and outclass the battleship fleet of the Royal Navy. Britain could not afford to compete with those programmes: likewise she could not afford to see her naval power simply eclipsed. The situation required action, but what action and at what cost? A series of policy dilemmas confronted the British government, and on the resolution of those dilemmas depended the future shape of British power and the evolution of the Empire. This book analyses those policy dilemmas and the Lloyd George government's attempts to understand and reconcile them.

The eventual means of resolving some of those problems came at the conferences held in Washington from 1921 to 1922. The outcomes of the conferences were several: a naval limitation treaty establishing overall parity of capital ships between the United States and Royal Navy (and Japanese preponderance in the Eastern Pacific); a multi-party treaty to uphold the territorial status quo in China; and a Four Power Pact by which Britain, the United States, Japan and France guaranteed to respect the integrity of each other's possessions in the Far East.⁶ In practice the Four Power Pact meant little, but it did give the British a convenient reason to cancel the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1923 in a way which did not involve an outright insult to the Japanese government. The creation of the Alliance had been a significant moment in the lead up to the First World War, and its end arguably set Japan on the path that would lead to the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941. The abrogation of the alliance owed much to growing tensions and concerns within the Empire about imperial defence, and the eclipse of Britain's naval predominance would accelerate the process of imperial breakup as the dominions increasingly took their affairs into their own hands.⁷ The process accelerated dramatically as a

result of the war fought in the Pacific between 1941 and 1945. That war would also see the flowering of the Pax Anglo-Americana agreed at Washington in 1921 and 1922, and signalled by parity in capital ships.⁸ However, the process had been less than easy and at several points in the 1920s a renewal of Anglo-American rivalry over naval armaments threatened to derail the development of the special relationship.

The different aspects of the policy dilemmas which emerged in the period after 1918 have been studied separately by diplomatic, naval, political, social, economic and cultural historians. What this study seeks to do is to combine these approaches to produce a more rounded and wider ranging analysis of this pivotal moment in the history of British power. The First World War had given rise to more questions than it had answered. How were Britain and the Royal Navy to respond to a series of critical challenges that impacted from Clydeside to Whitehall, to Tasmania, the Great Lakes and Caribbean? How could it deal with problems which ranged from balance sheets to naval design, the emergence of disruptive technologies to industrial policy, interstate diplomacy and the place of the Royal Navy in British society? After resolving the dilemmas of policy, how militarily strong was Great Britain in the interwar period?

The last of these issues has featured in the work of British historians who have viewed the steady reduction of the Royal Navy as part of the process of gradual national decline from weary imperial titan to middle-ranking, post-colonial member of the European Union. The story of the Royal Navy in the world wars, the barren years of the 1920s and 1930s, the Suez and Falklands Crises and the coalition government's SDSR 2010 provide effective illustrations of the narrative of national decline. David Edgerton does, however, remind us that the declinist literature that has dominated the UK national story can be taken too far. Before Britain was a welfare state it was a *warfare state* where the state, industry, armaments, armed forces and politicians were closely tied. National decline was neither inevitable nor necessarily gradual across the twentieth century. In the British state before and after the First World War, the armed forces provided much of the impetus for science, technology and manufacturing.⁹ In a special issue of the *International History Review* in 1991 on 'The Decline of Great Britain' Keith Nielson, John Ferris and Brian McKercher challenged the declinist narrative of British military power in the interwar period.¹⁰ Their collective argument was that the story of British military weakness in the years of appeasement has been overwritten and that the British state remained militarily strong in the early twentieth century. Yet such worthy revisionism has made little impact on the overall historiography of interwar Britain.

Meanwhile, diplomatic historians of the Anglo-American relationship have emphasized the need for all powers in the post-1918 period to try and resolve the differences between them to ensure the effective functioning of the League of Nations and the avoidance of rivalries and arms races which might lead to war. Erik Goldstein, for example, sees that in this period Britain confronted a succession of crises: diplomatic and imperial.¹¹ He points to fears of French ambitions to be the dominant military force in continental Europe as a key driver for British desires for a closer relationship with the United States.¹² While older historians view the 1920s as a period when Britain and the United States laid the foundations for the special relationship by resolving a series of key issues, Brian McKercher sees it as a defining period in a 'struggle for supremacy' between the two powers. While financial issues were significant, McKercher rightly argues that naval power 'stood as the most visible issue in the Anglo-American struggle for supremacy after 1918'.¹³ Agreement over naval arms was vital to pave the way to an agreement with the American government over the repayment of Britain's war debts.

Anglo-Japanese and imperial historians have stressed the way in which the abrogation of the alliance with Japan revolved around concerns throughout the Empire. The Canadians in particular were opposed to the renewal of the Alliance because of American attitudes towards Japan.¹⁴ Similarly the Australian government worried that the alliance was incompatible with its drive for a 'White Australia'. The views of the dominions on the question of renewing the alliance were fully expressed at the Imperial Conference held in London from 20 June to 5 August 1921. The conference helped to frame British policy towards the conferences which opened in Washington later that year. The outcomes of the Washington Conferences prevented a naval arms race between Britain, the United States and Japan. The Four Power Pact and the guarantee of China's territorial integrity safeguarded Britain's imperial interests in East Asia and, for a while, helped to maintain good relations with the Japanese. In the short term at least, the outcomes of the Washington Conferences were almost entirely positive for British diplomacy. In the medium term abrogation of the alliance set in play forces which would help to deliver the scenario of a naval war against the Japanese that the planners began to envisage in 1919.

The diplomatic and imperial facets of the dilemmas at the heart of the perfect policy storm of 1919–22 have tended to overshadow the relevant naval historiography, and Anthony Best reminds us that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance has been subject to extensive myth-making from the 1930s onwards by the British right, and after the Second World War by those who wished to