Making Early Modern Naval History Relevant: Discussing Warship Design in the Undergraduate Classroom

How can the current state of naval history in higher education be described? With events including The State of Maritime Research in September 2017, and with the development of new courses such as the MA in Naval History at the University of Portsmouth, it could be said that the field is experiencing a restoration following a series of unpopular wars since the 1970s that resulted in the marginalisation of war studies.[1] Yet, with this said, it is in my experience that the field continues to attract certain stigmas that are disseminated among new and existing students. Perhaps it is because of war's unpopularity in current affairs that the majority of today's academics and researchers are more inclined to refer to themselves as "maritime" rather than "naval" historians, even when they focus on naval history.

It is worth taking into account that of the twelve papers presented at Greenwich on 9 September, just two used the term "naval" in their titles, with the majority preferring to use "maritime". One of the objectives of this event was to address issues in maritime studies such as "seablindness" and, bearing in mind naval history's relative isolation here, does this suggest that the more distinct field that concerns the military dimension of maritime studies is truly marginalised? If there is a degree of "seablindness" that exists towards history, then how susceptible is the smaller field of naval history to floundering? Finally, to provide the field with adequate attention, is it necessary to isolate naval studies through separate events such as the McMullen Naval History Symposium?

It must be stressed that as ever, the key to naval history's preservation is firmly placed within the education sector. In Britain, as with most sea-bordered states, maritime history, and with it naval history, thrives near the coast as well where trade and naval activity is most prominent: Exeter, Greenwich, Hull, King's College London, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Southampton and Swansea, all have maritime centres or courses dedicated to the field. It is also pleasing to know that the University of Birmingham runs an undergraduate module 'Warfare at Sea from the Armada to D-Day'. Furthermore, with the presence of research in landlocked institutions such as in

[1] My thanks to Professor John Hattendorf for highlighting the case of Vietnam.

Oxford, Reading and Warwick, it would be unfair to say that maritime and naval history is something taught only on the coast.

Although this suggests that the field has a very promising future, it does not show the entire picture. It is a misunderstanding that naval history is a niche field that concerns only battles at sea and yet, this view often influences departmental decisions to not teach it in great depth. This decision, which can be inadvertent, is particularly prominent because of the unpopularity of war in contemporary affairs, and it is also the product of the cultural turn of history which interestingly occurred at around the same time that war studies became unfavourable. As a result, naval history has suffered a number of blows because of its strong connection to military history. It has in some ways been pushed to the fringes of academic study, while the broader field of maritime studies has become increasingly popular. Having studied and worked in a midland based higher education institute, I have found that associating myself as a naval historian (which in many ways I am) has, unjustly, negative meanings attached to it. Indeed, with my research interests firmly based in early modern history, it has been suggested on more than one occasion that I should consider myself an early modern historian and not a naval historian because of the prospects that it could open for my career.[2]

Yet it would be preposterous to assert that the number of students and researchers approaching naval history is declining, and when reflecting on the event at Greenwich, it is clear that naval history has moved with the times, even if it often chooses to operate within the limits of maritime history instead. Researchers who would not associate themselves as naval historians now produce publications on naval history at an increasing rate. As an outcome, the field is being considered through a wider lens of themes and perspectives that provide it with the means to become interwoven within broader research disciplines including gender, animals and health. This is not a new development; scholars more closely aligned with political, cultural or social trends, such as Bernard Capp and Clifford Davies, produced some of the key contributions to early modern naval history during the second half of the twentieth

[2] Having discussed this with a number of attendees at this event, it is clear that I am not the first person to receive this advice.

century.[3] As a result, although naval history in higher education may not have as many devoted naval scholars attached to it today, the field has the potential to increase its popularity by expanding to influence and relate to broader historical, as well as scientific, disciplines.

One way of achieving this is by ensuring that historians collaborate with maritime museums. Working with the resources that museums have to offer can enhance both research and teaching, and the benefits of this are particularly apparent within the early modern field. Considering the popularity of Henry VIII and the Tudors, the recently reopened Mary Rose Museum provides a valuable path that leads students studying Tudor history into the exploration of naval developments. For this reason, resources including the *Mary Rose* and also the *Vasa* in Stockholm are useful teaching materials that can influence future historians. From the thousands of artefacts recovered from the *Mary Rose* wreck including rosary beads and nit combs, as well as the human remains that highlight the detrimental effects of working on a warship, such as the crushed kneecaps of gunners and impaired shoulder joints of archers, we can show our students that naval studies is a far more open, relevant and approachable topic than may be presumed. It is not just about guns and battles.

As someone who is driven by research led teaching, using these resources in the classroom is particularly important in a department, such as Warwick, that is strongly inspired by social and cultural history. Under this influence, my research has recently explored the design, decoration, and names of Tudor and early-Stuart warships. Bearing this in mind, when discussing this research in class I try to engage students by acknowledging that naval history is more than just military studies, and that the sea was important to the early modern world. Courses that discuss the early modern economy, identity, the political landscape, popular and elite culture, as well as the more obvious military connections, should stress the importance of the sea, and with it the navy.

By teaching, I hope to increase awareness that in history, the sea and with it the navy, is always in the background of developments. The most obvious point to start when confronting this is by discussing the military revolution debate that connects

[3] B. Capp, *Cromwell's Navy: The Fleet and the English Revolution, 1648-1660* (Oxford, 1989); C.S.L. Davies, 'The Administration of the Royal Navy under Henry VIII: The Origins of the Navy Board', *The English Historical Review*, 80 (1965), pp. 268-88.

military advances to state development.[4] Although the navy has since been introduced into this debate, when it is discussed by naval historians, this valuable work is often underappreciated because it struggles to breech through the bubble of naval scholarship into more diverse readership.[5] In other words, the navy's importance to this debate is acknowledged in key texts, and yet at the same time the navy is largely cast away to sail in the distant background of the subject. This is a pity considering that for the majority of European states, standing navies were new institutions of the period that required entirely new administrative frameworks to operate them, unlike land forces. For this reason, when students are approaching revolutions in infantry, the *trace italienne*, gunpowder (and so on and so forth) it is important that the development of standing navies (and the technical achievements that came with them) is considered in equal depth.

This approach does however follow traditional misunderstandings of the field, by only relating naval studies to military and political trends and it is important that the future of naval history goes beyond this. Historians of architectural design who explore the importance of palaces and other historic buildings relate their work to social and cultural history, and the study of warships and private vessels should be studied with similar intentions when their construction was led by similar motivations – to impress, represent and empower. This is just one example of how naval history is relevant to broader disciplines. Students do not need to be enrolled on modules tailored to naval history in order to use this field as part of their research. By assessing images and contemporary accounts of warships in the classroom, students can discover how the design and career of vessels was politically, culturally and socially developed. By asking students why the *Nasby* was renamed and its figurehead hung from a gibbet and later burned following the Restoration, as one example, we can show that navies were not disconnected tools of history but were instead important components of history's progression.

[4] Perhaps the most valuable source for which is C.J. Rogers (ed.), *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1995). For the navy, see J. Glete, *Navies and Nations: Warships, Navies and State Building in Europe and America, 1500-1860* (Stockholm, 1992).
[5] See for example the valuable contributions of 'The Military Revolution at Sea: Trends and Developments in Early Modern Naval Historiography', *Journal for Maritime Research*, 13 (2011), pp. 117-37. Includes contributions from N.A.M. Rodger, John F. Guilmartin Jr and Gijs A. Rommelse.

Navies were the product of international rivalry, and could develop through a belligerent arms race or through more amicable competition, and they thus served as an interesting representation of political and cultural developments. Adapting this argument for teaching is particularly rewarding for any comparative course that encourages students to compare a nation's history (most often Britain's) with that of another. Looking at diplomatic events in class illustrates how the navy could serve as an important component of national histories. For example, as part of the Field of Cloth of Gold in June 1520, the *Henry Grace à Dieu*, the flagship of Henry VIII had its sails painted gold in honour of the event; moreover, in another case, the *Prince Royal* was used to transport Princess Elizabeth and her husband Frederick of Bohemia to the continent in April 1613 following their wedding. Highlighting the visual and ceremonial importance of the navy, and providing students with access to imagery and written accounts will encourage more students to engage with naval history as part of their own research.

Naval history, then, and with it the broader maritime discipline, is in good strength and its future has the potential to prosper. It is however important for naval history to continue to expand across disciplines in order to avoid criticism for its overtly military outlook. As social, cultural, political, religious and other historical disciplines progress, we need to ensure that naval history is not left behind, and this can be done by teaching students that its developments were an active component of broader historical trends, or at the very least, it serves as a useful representation of them. Just as the *HMS Queen Elizabeth*, recently completed and now based at Portsmouth, received a very popular response from the state, public and media at its arrival, the same reception would have been received in the early modern period with the launch of celebrated vessels. The construction and presence of these vessels received a large popular national response that was engrained into society and culture. Navies have always been more than just weapons of statesmen, as they are also connected to national, regional and individual identity. The navy was, and remains today, far more than a military apparatus, and in teaching we need to ensure that students understand this.

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