

“Imitation is ...”: A Plea for Comparative Naval History

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Les marines nationales ne sont pas isolés. La perception d'aspirations navales et des activités d'états rivaux perçus a été un moteur puissant pour le développement et le renforcement des forces de combat maritimes modernes. En période de paix, les bâtiments d'états à la fois amicales et compétitives se sont rencontrés aussi bien en haute mer ou en visitant les ports des autres. De nombreuses marines contemporaines descendent de forces anciennement établies. Tous ces facteurs ont favorisé à la fois l'émulation et le transfert formel, ou plus souvent informel, et l'adaptation des traditions et des pratiques d'une marine à l'autre. Mais si les marines ne sont pas isolés, l'histoire navale est trop souvent écrite comme si la marine nationale, vue sous la loupe de l'historien, était une organisation unique créant à nouveau ses propres flottes, ses traditions et ses pratiques. La phrase « l'imitation est ... » valorisera les avantages à tirer, et reconnaîtra les handicaps non négligeables à surmonter, quand les marines sont analysées comparativement l'une à l'autre.

Several years ago – and not too many miles to the west of Ottawa – I announced that I was going over to the ‘Dark Side’ of naval history – and that I did not plan to return. By that I meant that my historical interest had come to focus on gloomy, if compelling for me, topics: morbidity and mortality in naval forces, naval prisons, and old-age homes for former sailors and Marines. But, when invited to participate in this conference, I was forced to eat my earlier words and come back to the mainstream of naval history. I did so because this conference seemed an ideal opportunity to advocate for one of my favorite obsessions: comparative naval history.

National navies do not exist in isolation. The perceived naval aspirations and activities of rival states have provided powerful motivators for the development and enhancement of modern maritime fighting forces. In times of peace, ships of both friendly and competitive states have encountered each other at sea or visited each other’s ports. Both of these factors – rivalry and exposure – have promoted emulation and the formal and (more often) informal transfer and adaptation of traditions and practices from one navy to another.

All of the navies represented at this conference descend from a common ancestor: Britain’s Royal Navy. Some, seeking to assert a national identity, may have

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chosen to distance themselves from the family-of-origin. Others may be unaware – or only dimly aware – of the genealogy of doctrines, traditions, and daily routines running back to the Royal Navy. Here are two cases in point, taken from my own interest in comparing the lives of ratings in Britain’s Royal Navy and enlisted men in the United States Navy. They illustrate why it is necessary to know the history and practices of the older navy if one wishes to understand what is happening in its younger, but ambitious, U.S. emulator on this side of the Atlantic.

Captain (later Admiral) Richard G. Keats commanded HMS *Superb* between February 1801 and April 1807. At some point during that period – possibly as late as 1803 – he issued a set of internal regulations for *Superb*. I offer, taken more or less at random, Number 65, one of the articles from those regulations:

The Ship’s Company are to be mustered every evening at Sun set, at quarters or divisions: all absentees or Men found in liquor to be reported and proper notice to be taken at such times, of men that are dirty or slovenly. – No long untied hair to be allowed & cloaths however old should not be ragged.

With a speed that is almost hard to credit, articles with only minor (if any) differences in wording from Captain Keats’s began to appear in the internal regulations of ships of the fledgling United States Navy. Here is Number 65’s reincarnation in the rules of the frigate *Philadelphia*, issued in 1803:

76 – The ships company are to be mustered every evening at sun set, at quarters or divisions, all absentees or men found in liquor to be reported and proper notice to be taken at such times of men that are dirty or slovenly. No long untied hair to be allowed and cloaths however old should not be ragged ...

And in those of the frigate *President* on the eve of the War of 1812:

ARTICLE 50th. The Ships Company is to be mustered every evening at sunset at Quarters, or divisions; all absentees or men found in liquor are to be reported, and proper notice to be taken at such times of men that are dirty or slovenly. No long untied hair to be allowed.

Other articles and the regulations of different ships could be cited, but they would all go to make the same point: text from Keats’s internal regulations for *Superb* – sometimes modified, sometimes word-for-word – lived on through several generations of ships and captains of the pre-Civil War U.S. Navy. Let there be no question about their common ancestor. The historical DNA is a positive match. A manuscript copy of the *Superb* orders, marked up with changes appropriate to the American force or reflecting the preferences and prejudices of *President*’s captain, can still be found among the papers of Commodore John Rodgers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.¹

¹ Commodore John Rodgers Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Amn 3490, “Orders & Regulations for the Government of his Britannick Majesty’s Ship Superb Addressed to the first Lieutenant and the other Commissioned warrant & petty officers of the Superb by, R.G. Keats, Captain”; [*Philadelphia* internal regulations], U.S. Office of Naval Records and Library, *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary*

There is a different kind of evidence of the Royal Navy’s heritage. In this case there is no smoking gun, as was found in Commodore Rodgers’s papers, but – at least to this historian – the inspiration appears to be clear. Admiralty Circular No. 12 of 19 June 1827 directed: “No Petty Officer ... shall be liable to Corporal Punishment as long as he is so rated”² On the United States side of the Atlantic no similar general order was, to my knowledge, ever issued by the Navy Department. But tradition and example can be stronger than any official directive. Soon articles such as this one, taken from the sloop-of-war *Marion*’s internal regulations of the late 1830s, began appearing in the general orders of ship after ship:

Art. 58th. No officer is to strike or flog a Petty Officer for any offence they may commit; they are to be reported to me [William J. Belt, the captain] or the commanding officer, and in my absence they may be confined.³

But comparative naval history is not just about similarities and borrowings. It is equally important to know about different traditions that do *not* share a common origin. The navy of France – to take the case where I have that dangerous smattering of a little knowledge – has a far different tradition from that of the British-descended navies. (But then, being French, of course they would want that to be the case!) I am thinking, for example, of the French marine’s tradition of colonial administration as a career path, a tradition that has no counterpart of which I am aware in the Royal Navy’s heritage.

To repeat: national navies do not exist in isolation. But naval history is too often written as though the national navy under the historian’s scrutiny was a unique organization creating its fleets, its traditions, and its practices anew. I know that there are powerful practical reasons why naval history is written this way. Many projects begin as doctoral dissertations. A prudent concern for getting one’s degree completed with one’s mental health intact dictates the selection of a narrowly defined topic that can be mastered in a reasonable time. Even for more experienced historians, the need to gain command of the sources for two or more navies – often in two or more languages – must seem a frightening challenge.

However, a few hardy souls have accepted the challenge. My favorite example of multi-nation naval history is James Phinney Baxter’s *The Introduction of the Ironclad Warship*, a study of the more-or-less contemporary development of such vessels by Britain, France and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Baxter’s book, based on extensive and original research in the archives of all three countries, was published nearly eighty years ago – in 1933. And – yes – the book *was* originally Baxter’s doctoral dissertation.⁴ It can be done.

Powers (Washington, 1939-45), 3:32-41, where they are incorrectly identified as the internal regulations of *Constitution*; Rodgers Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Amn 34901, John Rodgers, “Standing General Orders” for the frigate *President*, 1810-14.

² UK National Archives, Kew, ADM 7/889.

³ U.S. Navy Department Library, Washington, “Internal Regulations For the U.S. Ship Marion William J Belt Esquire Commander,” [undated, but late 1839].

⁴ James Phinney Baxter, *The Introduction of the Ironclad Warship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933; reprinted, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1986; reprinted, with an

Fine as it was and is, *The Introduction of the Ironclad Warship* failed to inspire a corps – or even a corporal’s guard – of naval historians to follow the multi-nation route. Naval historical scholarship since Baxter’s day has almost exclusively focused on topics within the history of a single navy. Sad to relate, many of these recent historians appear to have been so absorbed in writing their own books as to be unaware of related work, by other historians, sometimes in other languages, that they really should have read. As Harold Langley once mournfully observed in conversation, it appears that some naval historians would rather write a new book on a particular subject than read the good one on the same subject that already exists.

Enough gloom! There are hopeful signs – of which this conference is certainly one – that multi-navy comparative studies are finally coming into their own. My favorite naval historian, Arthur Marder, offered insightful comparisons between the Imperial Japanese Navy and its much-admired role-model, Britain’s Royal Navy, in the first volume of *Old Friends, New Enemies*. Ronald Spector’s splendid *At War at Sea: Sailors and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century* examines the battle experience in a variety of navies, across the span of one hundred years. Interestingly enough, two outstanding and recent comparative studies – C.I. Hamilton’s *Anglo-French Naval Rivalry, 1840-1870* and Howard Fuller’s *Clad in Iron: The American Civil War and the Challenge of British Naval Power* – return to the years and the triad of navies – British, French, and American – examined by James Phinney Baxter seventy-some years ago.⁵

What about other national navies? There are more navies out there than just those of Britain, France, and the United States. Surely the navies of Germany or Italy or Japan or Russia – to name only the most obvious – need to be brought under the comparative spotlight. A strong move in this direction has been made by one of the participants to this conference. Professor Christopher Bell is, together with Bruce Elleman, the joint editor of a pioneering work, *Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century*.⁶ Bell’s and Elleman’s volume explores those ever-fascinating sailors’ revolts through a panel of authors offering a multi-navy perspective.

With apologies to Professor Bell, and indeed the editor of this fine present collection, this brings me (perhaps ungratefully) to a concern that I have. One obvious way to do multi-navy comparative history is to recruit a group of scholars, assign them each a topic or a navy, and then put the results together in a single volume. I recognize the appeal and advantages of this approach, but I think it is extremely difficult to hold

introduction by Donald L. Canney, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001).

⁵ Arthur J. Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies: The Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-90); Ronald H. Spector, *At War at Sea: Sailors and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Viking, 2001); C.I. Hamilton, *Anglo-French Naval Rivalry, 1840-1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Howard J. Fuller, *Clad in Iron: The American Civil War and the Challenge of British Naval Power* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008; reprinted, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

⁶ Christopher M. Bell and Bruce A. Elleman (eds.), *Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century: An International Perspective* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

multiple contributors to the same standards of excellence in research, analysis and writing – let alone getting them to send in their chapters in a timely manner! To my mind such a collaborative volume is just not the same thing as when an individual scholar brings a single perspective and a unique insight to the subject.

Finally, I want to shift my ground a bit and conclude with an appeal for naval historians to be ambitious in their projects – to explore untapped sources – to borrow methods and insights from other fields of history or other disciplines – to bring their personal visions to naval history – to write naval history that is new and fresh.

Let me cite an example of what a creative individual with different insights can contribute to naval history. It has been my privilege recently to be rather closely involved with a book with which I hope many readers may be familiar – Bruce Taylor’s *The Battlecruiser HMS Hood*.⁷ Taylor comes to twentieth-century naval history after a previous scholarly incarnation as an historian of early modern Spanish religious history. *The Battlecruiser HMS Hood* takes the traditional ship’s history and moves it a giant step forward. Inspired by the French historical tradition, Taylor has sought to write a ‘total history’ of a ship – her technology, her people, her problems, her cruises, her sudden death. In that attempt he displays a truly remarkable command of technical, human, and operational detail that I jealously admire, but could never begin to emulate.

The important message for practitioners of naval history to be found in Taylor’s work is this: It is better to aim too high, even should one fail to achieve all to which one aspires, than to aim too low and gain easy success. Comparative naval history offers many challenging, if perhaps risky, opportunities to aim high. I encourage naval historians to accept that challenge.

⁷ Bruce Taylor, *The Battlecruiser HMS Hood: An Illustrated Biography, 1916-1941* (London: Chatham Publishing; Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004).