

CHAPTER ONE

The Royal Navy, History and the Study of Leadership

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Given the apparent ubiquity of interest in leadership today it is curious that the study of leadership has not featured more strongly as an explicit feature in naval history. This is not to suggest that it is entirely absent. In fact, we know a remarkable amount both about leaders and what leadership was expected to be. Throughout the ages, history has provided examples for emulation or warnings to avoid. Indeed, modern naval history emerged from a determination to teach naval officers and statesmen the information and the principles it was thought would guide them as they assumed leadership roles. History was the discipline for the aspirant leader – and this explicit function is one factor that has led to the greater focus on leadership in modern navies than their sailing predecessors. After the First World War, other disciplines, such as psychology, economics and political science, with their ambitions, or claims, to provide scientific predictability, began to assume the dominant role in leadership development, and historians, more acutely aware of the dangers of teleology and sensibly unwilling to delve into ‘psycho-history’, were generally disinclined to compete with their social science colleagues on this ground.⁶ Nevertheless, history remained an essential part of the cultural capital of naval officers and the biographical or autobiographical publications of senior officers provided

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a constant institutional link to the past. Operational history from the point of view of the commander is a standard narrative approach. Similarly, institutional and political histories delineated by the reigns of monarchs, or the spans of particular office-holders, are also standard narrative tropes. In many ways, 'history from the top' is a history of leadership.

Naval history is hugely popular and there are many implicit lessons for leadership in the stream of operational histories, memoirs and social studies that emerge every year. Leadership can be studied from many directions. 'Who are the leaders?' is a relatively well-researched question that is yielding excellent results. Naval history has benefited from the development of social and ethnographic approaches to organisations. We now have a better understanding of the social and political contexts, demographics and career trajectories of various naval officer corps.⁷ We still need to know much more, across chronological spans and, particularly, we need to know about the officers of other navies. If the assumption is that leaders make a difference to organisations, we need to know how those leaders differed in different navies and at different times.

One of the significant contributions of the 'new naval history' of the second half of the twentieth century is that it has deepened our appreciation of the complex administrative, logistical systems needed for successful operations at sea. We also now have a better view of the totality of navies as institutions – how they have evolved to exercise an expanding sea power with ever more complex, interlinked and expensive weaponry. This has helped us appreciate the diffusion of leadership throughout systems that enable effective operations. Thus, what leaders do and what defines successful leadership has evolved. The social and institutional norms for recognising high-performing naval leaders in the eighteenth century were intimately tied up with successful action at sea. Administrative leadership was seen as important, but entirely secondary to the officer at sea. These norms seem to have continued largely unaltered over two centuries, despite the growing bureaucratic and industrial contribution to operational success.⁸ There are good reasons for this, as the concept of the 'heroic' leader was simultaneously blossoming with the growth of popular culture and media.⁹ Nevertheless, the processes involved in assessing this evolving organisational leadership requirement and the popular understanding of the leader in the Royal Navy and other navies remain to be fully investigated.

While historians have done a great deal to explore the complexity of naval organisations and establish the social structure of officers corps, there has been less sustained engagement with the idea of leadership as an historical phenomenon. In some ways, naval historians, whose discipline emerged out of the demands for instructing leaders, are now less able to articulate an understanding of naval leadership than their social science colleagues. From the middle of the nineteenth century until midway through the twentieth, civilian organisations learned a great deal about leadership from military organisations. Today, the reverse is more likely to be true. Given the huge changes in the challenges

faced by navies and the advances in leadership research, it is curious that leadership has not commanded more attention within navies and among naval historians. For example, we can now look at the late eighteenth-century Royal Navy as an institution that was qualitatively distinct from its rivals in terms of tactical proficiency, administrative capability, depth of supporting infrastructure and the strength of its linkage to domestic political culture. We can suppose that these made an operational difference, but we have not given the social function of leadership that much attention. Leadership seems to be an uncontentious phenomenon. After the resolution of the seventeenth-century friction between the relative merits of 'gentlemen' or 'tarpaulin' commanders, there seems to be a view that the naval officer corps evolved organically and incrementally, learning to adapt to growing tasks and burdens under the pressures of frequent wars until it reached its apogee in Nelson and his 'Band of Brothers'.¹⁰ The years of peace and the decades of limited challenge to the Royal Navy left it in a weakened state. Reward, promotion, routines and procedures were no longer mediated by operational fleet action and the performance of the navy in the First World War reflected this.¹¹ Within the navy there was a clear discomfort about the perceived inadequacy in its performance during the war. Very soon, attention was paid to the higher education of the senior officer corps, but it took until the early 1930s for significant changes in initial leadership development to take place.¹² The Second World War did not throw up naval leaders with the profile of a Beatty in an earlier generation, or of military commanders like Montgomery. After the war, the experience of operations was integrated into the corporate memory of the officer corps, and the capability of the corps rose in conjunction with more scientific approaches to selection and promotion. Since 1990, in the absence of cold or hot war pressures, these scientific approaches, rigorous training and education (including some historical studies) are now the baseline for understanding the capability of the navy's officer corps. Overall, naval leadership has not produced the historical interest that has developed for army leadership, whether it is the revisionist conclusions about military command in the First World War or the relative performance of senior officers in the Second.¹³

This leaves a number of important questions open. For example, when so much of the material and operational context of the Royal Navy changed between 1689 and 1914, was naval leadership unchanging? Has naval leadership changed in response to the social changes of the twentieth century and if so, how and why, and what impact has it had on the navy? How did contemporaries understand leadership and what attributes did they ascribe to successful leaders? If operational experience in war is such an important determinant of the capability of the officer corps, why did the Royal Navy not excel in the American War of Independence, when the officers in command during this war learned their trade during the most decisive and successful naval war of the century, under the eye of senior officers who had many years of operational

experience?¹⁴ In which aspects of leadership did the navy excel and which were an Achilles heel? Does naval leadership differ from other types of leadership, particularly the leading of armies or other government organisations? Probably most important, was the leadership of the Royal Navy different from that in other navies at any point; if so, did it have an impact on the outcome of operations and why?

These are big questions, requiring a systematic approach to analysis and cannot be answered in the space of a single essay. However, I hope that looking at one aspect of leadership may make a useful contribution in linking the navy to the nation. As has been outlined above, leadership can be examined in terms of what leaders did, how they were expected to behave, what success or failure they experienced or what characteristics they are supposed to have possessed. Most studies of naval leaders are viewed from the perspective of the leader, through the medium of biographical or operational studies. Less common are studies that examine a leader in the social context of leadership. Yet all leadership is a social process that occurs within a complex environment that includes individuals who are leaders, followers, opponents and bystanders, all of whom are influenced by a wide range of stimuli. While the naval command decisions are in the hands of the leader, the interpretation and subsequent action are in the hands of the followers and the results are determined by the interaction between those actions and a wide range of variables in the environment. Furthermore, the evaluation of the quality of naval leadership is determined not by the leader but by others: the crew of a ship, the Admiralty, the monarch, Parliament, the public and even the wider global audience. Each of these may differ from the commander in their judgement of the action and there is no certainty that those judgements will be consistent. From the middle of the seventeenth century at the very latest, English (and then British) society was connected to the leadership of the navy. National support for the navy, and thus its naval leadership, expressed through Parliament, press and entertainments, was essential to its financial and social existence. This leads us to an important question that needs some sort of answer: given that British society changed so much over the period 1680–2000, and the importance of external social and political judgements of naval performance, why have naval historians paid so little attention to the changes in thinking about leadership over the past half century? Only the sketchiest of answers can be suggested here, but the following is offered as a starting point.

At one level the answer is fairly obvious. The success of the Royal Navy over nearly 300 years suggests that whoever was leading that force was doing a good job. It was failure that prompted reflection on leadership performance, not success, and there was no need for theory development by contemporaries. For subsequent historians there was such a plethora of evidence showing how the Royal Navy materially and operationally outstripped its competitors that seeking additional causality in leadership – unless it was obviously exceptional

(such as with Hawke or Nelson) – was unnecessary. There was a seemingly natural, virtuous symbiosis in which quality of leadership was something that emerged from the successful application of seapower, which was, in turn, reinforced by the quality of the leaders it bred.

However, beneath this there was another assumption: that leadership capability was an innate personal attribute that could be developed by imitating the great and good, but it was essentially God-given and, increasingly in the nineteenth century, the product of a gentlemanly upbringing. Christian concepts of providential interventions in response to human moral behaviours provided a strong philosophical basis for believing that failure was the result of moral weakness just as success reflected a virtuous character.¹⁵ The Enlightenment and Romantic focus on the human rather than the divine did not weaken this relationship between individual morality and success. Science contributed to a better understanding of the natural environment and thus better design and operations in maritime affairs.¹⁶ However, the individual's efforts were still the major determinant of good fortune. The virtues of hard work and thrift mixed with evangelical ethics provided the basis for explaining the rise of humankind and more particularly the British. It was no part of the naval training and education process to explore this linkage in depth, but to provide the opportunities for officers to demonstrate these virtues in leadership tasks. Even when the search for the underlying principles of naval war was embedded in naval higher education, the quest did not extend to leadership.¹⁷ Higher education focused on expanding the rational capability of the mind rather than moral development. Strategic judgement could be inculcated through the scientific study of history and war, allied to more technical disciplines to aid decision-making.¹⁸ By the end of the nineteenth century, intellectual strength and knowledge developed by formal naval education, allied with moral strength fostered by an initial gentlemanly education, the professional example of past naval heroes and the practical experience of leading men in battle, provided the ideal environment for developing successful naval leadership. It was a formula that seemed intuitively right to a generation of naval officers who served in one or both of the world wars and it has barely been seriously questioned in historical studies.¹⁹ The assumptions could easily be read back into the eighteenth century.²⁰ There is, therefore, a long tradition of consensus that naval leadership is a personal attribute and is highly developed by the organisational culture, its education, systems and practices so that the best get through to the higher leadership of the force. It is an institutional belief that is shared by other navies.²¹

While this consensus holds firm, there have been developments in other academic fields. Historians have always plundered the intellectual fruits of other disciplines in order to help them develop insights into their own subjects. With leadership studies the plundering has generally been in the reverse. The two world wars provided plenty of examples for those studying leadership to populate their case studies. Military case studies continue to provide a selling point

for the more popular end of the market. The result is not always satisfactory – a misunderstood situation applied to an irrelevant theory does no one any good. Nevertheless, there has been a substantial amount of theory development within leadership studies over the last 50 years which might enrich our historical understanding. For example, motivation theories have produced some interesting reflections on prize taking in the eighteenth-century Royal Navy.²²

Where the lack of attention to leadership is most apparent is in the analyses of comparative naval power. In many histories, the differences in leadership are taken for granted, indeed embedded in a founding ideology. For over 250 years, a national myth of British difference, based on Britons' relationship with the sea, was slowly created and entrenched in British thinking.²³ The idea that Britain bred natural seamen and sea officers became a standard element in explaining the rise of British naval power.²⁴ The difference between seamen such as Hawkins, Frobisher and Drake and their Spanish adversaries, who were primarily soldiers, forms an important part in the story of the Spanish Armada of 1588. Similarly, the contrast between the experience of officers in the Royal Navy and those of the more obviously aristocratic-led navies of Bourbon France and Spain is important to the traditional story of the British rise to naval hegemony by 1815. The fact that these differences existed has been well established, and there is an intuitive sense that such social differences could have been significant, but the impact of these differences on the performance of navies over spans of time has not been extensively studied. Individual situations in which the impact of the quality of leadership is clear can be found, most obviously after the collapse of the French naval officer corps in 1790, but there are very few such clear-cut examples. Furthermore, there are other occasions when any assumption of superior leadership is less tenable. The leadership differences between the Dutch and British naval officer corps in the seventeenth century are less clear. United States and British officer corps have been extensively studied, but the operational impact of differences over 200 years are not transparent. The different trajectories of leadership development for the officer corps of most European navies over the nineteenth century are still seriously under-researched. Historically, the leadership assumptions in the Japanese and Chinese navies have not received much scholarly attention.

Long-term success, an intuitively coherent ideology of seapower and the entrenched belief in the moral foundations of leadership, therefore, may be three reasons why naval leadership has not been of much interest to historians of the British public. Another factor might be the nature of networks that support the Royal Navy. The navy, like any military force, exists within a network of contexts which impinge on its operational performance and the choices made by the leaders of this organisation. Broadly, one can see two immediate and two deeper, long-term elements of this network. The most immediate is the operational environment. Navies exist to fight or deter conflict. The operational

context is usually explicit and immediate with platforms, weapons and training directed to defeating the expected enemy. The second immediate element is the contemporary, domestic, political context. How the political system interprets naval power, what value it places on the costs and benefits produced by navies will have a direct impact on tangible factors, such as budgets and rewards, as well as intangible factors like definitions of success.

However, beneath these two immediate elements, there are others: the institutional and social. All organisations, including navies, are the product of accumulated experience. The Royal Navy is very aware of this experience and is aware of the experiences of other navies, both contemporary and historical. This creates an institutional environment within which the daily operational capability evolves. It produces the norms of behaviour, the structure within which doctrine is created and the deeper assumptions regarding the use of navies and naval power.

The Royal Navy is one of the best-researched organisations in British history. This reflects not just the extent of the sources that are available to historians, but the strength of the navy as an institution in British society. It has been consciously involved in research for over a century and the fruits of that research have an enthusiastic audience. By writing the history, or dominating its writing, the navy contributes powerfully to what is considered to be good leadership. Naval history from a naval officer's point of view was an important feature of early twentieth-century historiography. The result of this is that the navy has an important role in determining where leadership success and failure lie. A good example of history being written from a naval perspective is the work of Sir Herbert Richmond, a fine scholar with a strong and clear operational viewpoint that enabled him to discriminate between good and bad naval leaders, but distorted his judgement with regard to the civilian role in leadership decisions.²⁵ One of the important features of new naval history has been to put the navy into the wider social framework to explain the logistical, political and economic dimensions of naval operations, but the systematic exploration of naval leadership has yet to be undertaken.

Beyond this, there is the influence of wider society. The operational, institutional and political systems interact within society. The wider social and cultural norms help shape them, place parameters around decision-making and provide priorities or stimuli for trajectories of action. The new naval history is a manifestation of a wider public, in this case academic, participation in naval history. However, the public are not just the producers of naval history, they are a principal consumer. Naval history is written for the public more than it is for professionals. In the public mind the leader as hero is still the dominant model of naval leadership. While twenty-first-century navies are fully aware of the complexity of leadership in defence organisations, they are also aware of the role heroes play in public perceptions of the force and the need to present history and the navy in a heroic mould remains important.²⁶

Together, the operational, political, institutional and social contexts are constantly evolving, providing the background for public interest in the navy, naval history and leadership. Throughout the last 120 years, naval history has become richer and more varied, but has not led to a major focus upon naval leadership. Instead, leadership tends to emerge in relation to other features of naval history.

The rapid operational changes after 1914 have attracted more attention than others. One of the truisms that emerges from this differential change process is that military organisations are always preparing to fight the last war. Leaders are the product of their experiences and training, and when the experience or training proves to be inappropriate for new operational situations catastrophe can result – the step change in technology or operational arts is one of the stock features of military history from the invention of gunpowder to Blitzkrieg. Consequently, the leaders of the Royal Navy and the decisions they made, facing steam power in the second half of the nineteenth century, long-range gunnery, new realities of competition, the submarine and air warfare in the next 50 years, have attracted a good deal of historical attention.²⁷ From these studies there are good examples of both individuals and the naval institutional systems that have influenced leadership and decision-making. Much less attention has been paid to the years after 1945. It does not offer the drama of change, or operational stress. Yet the whole period from 1918 to the present day is a particularly important field of study as it is marked by the rise of the profession of leadership development in Western society. Navies have not been immune from its influence, and understanding how institutions such as the Royal Navy have adapted and developed their understanding of leadership practice is a vital element in understanding their operational assumptions.

The lack of interest in naval leadership in the twentieth century is in marked contrast to that related to the British army. Perhaps, despite all the changes between 1890 and 1939, the navy was able to deal with the challenges it faced with its institutional framework and philosophy undamaged. The same was not true for the British army, which had barely recovered from the experience of the Russian War (1854–6) when the shock of the Boer Wars (1880–1 and 1899–1902), the First World War and the adjustments to a peace in which its purpose was unclear, raised a succession of leadership questions to which the answers were ambiguous at the time and remain contested to the present day.²⁸ It was also a period when the very nature of leadership and management in modern British society was being questioned and debated.²⁹ During the whole period, the Royal Navy remained a powerful institution. It had not won another Trafalgar, but it had won the war at sea and there were few existential doubters. Nevertheless, there remains a need to explore the leadership assumptions of the Royal Navy against the debates and changes that were going on elsewhere.

The lack of analysis is even more true for earlier centuries. The period 1815 to 1890 was a time of major technological changes that entailed social and institutional adjustment against a background of extensive operational activity

but little military threat. The navy has been placed firmly in the context of the administrative changes of the time. It was a period in which the 'expert' – technical or bureaucratic – became far more influential in the decision-making processes of governmental bodies. So far not much attention has been paid to this and a thorough modern, comprehensive analysis of the leadership assumptions, values, training and rewards of officer corps has still to be written.³⁰

The period between 1739 and 1815 was one of major operational and military threat. The Royal Navy emerged victorious and without parallel in the world. Our understanding of the logistical and administrative effort that underpinned this naval triumph is now quite extensive and the diffuse nature of the leadership required for this massive, complex exercise of naval power is better understood. However, there has been far less critical attention paid to the exercise of operational leadership. Possibly the dominance of Nelson as leader and personification of an ideal has done much to shape assumptions about leadership and leaders. It was a period in which the Royal Navy was consolidating as an institution – not just an organisation. By 1815 it was an institution with a political presence in the wider social environment, a culture of its own, respected internally and externally, on a journey of centralised control through which leaders and leadership could be controlled and shaped. It was not always like this and the process by which this happened, particularly in the first half of the century, is still in need of substantial research. What impact the changing intellectual environment, commonly known as the Enlightenment, had on the leadership of the navy is currently unknown. Once again, we know rather more about how this influenced armies than we do about the Royal Navy.³¹

The purpose of this paper has been to lay out some possibilities for the future study of naval leadership – primarily in the national context of the Royal Navy. Leadership has always been an implicit element in naval histories and there is now much excellent work about the social and intellectual origins of the officer corps and the performance of individual officers. However, given the chronological opportunities and importance of leadership as a variable in operational success or failure, there is a need for a more systematic study. The assumptions about virtuous symbiosis of naval leadership and seapower, between combat experience and leadership or between national connections and naval leadership all need to be explored in more detail – all the more so as the exercise of seapower becomes more tenuous, the opportunities for operational experience diminish and the national connection with the navy becomes more opaque.

It is a subject that is in need of serious attention and a vital element of this is to understand comparative naval leadership. Although this paper has focused on the nation and the navy, we will only really begin to understand how naval leadership works when we can see it operating across nations and time spans. It is an exciting agenda.

