

1-1-2005

## **The Historical Lessons and Intellectual Rigour of Admiral Sir Herbert William Richmond**

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### **Recommended Citation**

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2005, 19-29.  
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## Abstract

Admiral Sir Herbert William Richmond (1871-1946) is remembered as a naval officer, an historian, and an intellectual. He was nurtured during an era when the Royal Navy was assimilating the advent of 'mechanisation', and forming its doctrine in the artificial conditions of peace. This was the *Dreadnought* era: the era of the 'materialist' school of strategic thought when the Royal Navy was driven by the arguments of the technical rationalists, to the neglect of the historical strategists. Richmond led the intellectual counter—the 'historical' school of strategic thought—and while never producing an overall theory of naval strategy, he did produce an overall reality on the application of the naval instrument.

## Keywords

Historical, Lessons, Intellectual, Rigour, Admiral, Sir, Herbert, William, Richmond

## Disciplines

Law

## Publication Details

McLennan, B. (2005). The Historical Lessons and Intellectual Rigour of Admiral Sir Herbert William Richmond. *Australian Defence Force Journal: journal of Australian profession of arms*, (168), 19-29. Copyright 2005 the Department of Defence.

# The Historical Lessons and Intellectual Rigour of Admiral Sir Herbert William Richmond

Commander Bruce McLennan, RNZN

there is no doubt that we are the most appalling amateurs who ever tried to conduct a war<sup>1</sup>

Admiral H.W. Richmond

## Introduction

Admiral Sir Herbert William Richmond (1871–1946) is remembered as a naval officer, an historian, and an intellectual. He was nurtured during an era when the Royal Navy was assimilating the advent of ‘mechanisation’, and forming its doctrine in the artificial conditions of peace. This was the *Dreadnought* era: the era of the ‘materialist’ school of strategic thought when the Royal Navy was driven by the arguments of the technical rationalists, to the neglect of the historical strategists. Richmond led the intellectual counter—the ‘historical’ school of strategic thought—and while never producing an overall theory of naval strategy, he did produce an overall reality on the application of the naval instrument.

Admiral Richmond’s first book, *The Navy in the War of 1739–1748*, published in 1920, won him the Royal United Service Institution’s Chesney Gold Medal.<sup>2</sup> His most successful book *Statesman and Sea Power*, published in 1946, firmly established him as a classical theorist of the standing of Colomb, Mahan and Corbett. *Statesman and Sea Power* is a sweeping analysis of British foreign policy from Elizabeth I to the end of the Second World War in which Richmond examines ‘the inter-relationships of political and military strategy, and the connections between Britain’s developing overseas influence and the utilisation of her maritime strengths’.<sup>3</sup> It was his teachings on the abiding realities of ‘naval power’. It was also the mature thoughts of a man at the end of a long and exasperated life: one of constant frustration and disenchantment with the lack of intellectual rigour applied to the policies of his superiors. Still, even with these frustrations, Richmond’s life was incredibly rich and successful both as a naval officer and as a professional historian.

But there is a lot more to Herbert Richmond than just these two books—he was a prolific writer of books, historical documents, journal articles, newspaper articles, and pamphlets.<sup>4</sup> ‘Richmond was a unique phenomenon in the Victorian–Edwardian Navy—a professionally competent and successful officer who was also an intellectual. ...a highly censorious, ambitious, and impatient young captain of the *Dreadnought* era ...an officer eminently capable of clear thinking ...a decided flair for the use of persuasive logic; a man who by virtue of an outstanding intellect, a restless and uncompromising personality, and the depth of his grasp of historical realities became the fountainhead of British naval thought in the twentieth century. Above all, Richmond worked to cure the intellectual retardation, which characterised the pre-1914 Royal Navy and its myopic approach to policy development in the years following.’<sup>5</sup>

He led the ‘intellectual revolution’ within the Royal Navy from 1912, with the founding of the Naval Society and the publishing of the *Naval Review*, and he brought about major changes in naval strategic thought, policy and organisation that have endured the ‘gauntlet of robust

debate' over time. Heretical by his very nature, Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond gave us our understanding of matters 'naval' at the dawn of the 20th century—not a doctrine, but a methodology of higher education, staff work, planning and objectives.

The aim of this article is to analyse Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond—the man, his environment, and his teachings—in order to explain his contribution to our understanding of naval strategy at a time when we are also assimilating the advent of new technology—'informatisation'—and forming future combat doctrine in the artificial conditions of peace.

## The man

wide-minded and high-minded ... a strong character, possessing power of thought and power of expression, unique in having flown his flag as Commander-in-Chief, a figure in Cambridge, as Admiral, and Master of Downing College...

Captain Alfred Dewar 1947<sup>6</sup>

Herbert Richmond entered the Royal Navy in 1885. His first ship was HMS *Nelson*, flagship on the Australian Station. From his youth he was regarded as 'an officer of character and outstanding talent'.<sup>7</sup> Richmond also inherited a talent for drawing that led him towards the hydrographic specialisation and service in HMS *Stork*, serving in the Mediterranean, and later in HMS *Active*. In 1894 he was appointed to the shore establishment HMS *Vernon* to qualify as Torpedo Lieutenant, remaining there on the staff until 1897. As a Torpedo Lieutenant he served in HM Ships *Empress of India*, *Ramillies*, *Canopus* and *Majestic*. He was promoted to Commander in 1903 and served in HMS *Crescent*, the flagship of Rear Admiral John Durnford, before being transferred to the Admiralty in 1906. Admiral Sir John Fisher, who had become the First Sea Lord in 1904, was drawn by Richmond's energy and intellect—'out and away without precedent [one of] the most able men in the Navy'.<sup>8</sup> In 1908 he was promoted to Captain and appointed in command of the new battleship HMS *Dreadnought*, as the flag captain to Vice Admiral Sir William May.

After HMS *Dreadnought*, Richmond was appointed in command of the cruisers HM Ships *Furious* and, later, *Vindictive*. This was the time when Sir Julian Corbett was lecturing on naval history at the War College and Richmond found time to study the War of the Austrian Succession—later published as *The Navy in the War of 1739–1748*. In 1912 Captain Richmond started the idea of the *Naval Review* to encourage the exchange of 'sea-military knowledge', and gained the support of Winston Churchill, then the First Lord, Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg, then the First Sea Lord, and asked Admiral William Henderson to be the first honorary editor. Also that year, his proposed Naval War Staff finally came into being and Richmond was appointed as Assistant Director of Operations, remaining at the Admiralty until Lord Fisher's sudden resignation in May 1915. Shunted aside after challenging the wisdom of the Gallipoli campaign, he was expelled to act as liaison officer in Italy to the Duke of Abruzzi. When Admiral Sir David Beatty was appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet in 1917, Richmond regained political favour and was given command of the battleship HMS *Conqueror*. Thence he came to the Naval Staff in 1918 as Director Training Division and embarked on his campaign to place the education of naval officers on wider and firmer foundations. His views on training, in

particular public school recruitment, did not gain favour and he was sent back to the Grand Fleet in command of the elderly battleship HMS *Erin*: to be removed out of sight. '...both his terms of service in the Admiralty ended in abrupt dismissal; ... The causes lie, I think, partly in the defect of intolerance ... which probably appeared in speech and attitude rather than on paper, but more in the fact that in power of thought, and in outlook towards such matters as staff work and education, he was many years ahead of his contemporaries.'<sup>9</sup>

In 1920, Richmond was promoted to flag rank, and appointed to Greenwich in charge of the Senior Officer's War Course. This developed into his appointment from 1923 to 1925 as the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies. He was promoted to Vice Admiral in 1925, and knighted in 1926. In the East Indies he did much to focus attention on the needs of the navy in India, publishing *The Navy in India, 1763–83*.<sup>10</sup> In 1927 he became Commandant of the newly instituted Imperial Defence College—the first real attempt to bring together senior officers of all three Services to address the coordination of war effort. However, Admiral Beatty's retirement in 1927 removed his chief supporter, and although promoted to full Admiral in 1929, the final breach with the Admiralty came over his open advocacy of the small capital ship instead of building up to the limit of 35,000 tons agreed at the 1921 Washington Conference.

Herbert Richmond retired from the Royal Navy in 1931. In 1934 he succeeded Dr Holland Rose as Vere-Harmsworth Professor of Naval History at Cambridge, and later was elected to the Mastership of Downing College—a position he held until his death in December 1946.

'We shall not often see his like again. A first-class seaman, a brilliant technical officer... a deeply-read scholar, a clear thinker and an able debater...'<sup>11</sup> 'Looking back today I feel that it was not Richmond's profound knowledge of naval history, nor his great literary gifts, nor his power of piercing analysis of intractable problems that marked him as a most unusual man. Rather does his mental incorruptibility provide the key to his undoubted distinction.'<sup>12</sup>

## His environment

the tradition of 100 years of peace in which war was forgotten.

Admiral Richmond 27 August 1917<sup>13</sup>

To understand Richmond's environment during his career with the Royal Navy is to first understand Admiral Sir John Fisher's term as the First Sea Lord of the Admiralty. Both as a technocrat and as a power broker, Admiral Fisher dominated the Royal Navy's development through the 'mechanisation' revolution at the turn of the century. However, although Admiral Fisher was clever—even a genius—it would be wrong to think of him as an original thinker of outstanding ability. Fisher was the ultimate 'rationalist' and he had tremendous personal energy. He had the ability to detect new ideas and to manipulate the game of administrative and political power astutely enough to ensure that these ideas were brought to fruition. 'This is what distinguished Fisher from his contemporaries: that he was able to see the naval service and its problems [as a] whole and, within a short space of time, to translate theoretical ideas into practical policy. That he was often both ruthless and wrong is obvious. That he dominated the British naval scene between 1900–1914 is equally clear.'<sup>14</sup>

The most obvious manifestation of Admiral Fisher's influence occurred in 1906 when Britain launched HMS *Dreadnought*. Previously, British battleships built under the Naval Defence Act of 1889 typically displaced about 13,000 tons, carried four 12-inch guns in two large turrets, and were armed with as many as ten 6-inch and 4-inch guns as secondary batteries. The largest guns could hit a target 6,000 yards distant, or about six times further than the range of the then torpedoes. HMS *Dreadnought* was the first of the 'all big-gun ships'. She was armed with ten 12-inch guns in five turrets. With improved 'spotting' HMS *Dreadnought* could lay down an accurate fire to 13,000 yards and overwhelm any conventional battleship before it could get within range to reply. HMS *Dreadnought* also had steam-turbine engines in place of piston-driven engines, the first large warship so equipped. She burned a combination of oil and coal, and used four screws instead of two. Despite her 11 inches of armour at belt-line and a total displacement of 17,800 tons, she reached a speed of 21.5 knots on trials; six knots faster than existing battleships. In summary, the advent of HMS *Dreadnought* made all previous battleships obsolete. In her day, she was the apex of mechanisation and the revolution in technology. She became the foundation and showcase of the 'materialist' school of strategic thought.

This revolution in technology and preoccupation with naval strength, which, since the mid 19th century, had kept naval thinkers' minds occupied almost exclusively with questions of ship design and weapons performance, was undoubtedly the main reason for the Grand Fleet's numerical superiority in September 1914. However, its absolutism was also the basis of serious defects. 'The brain of Jupiter had indeed produced an Athene fully armed ... It was no one's business to be sure that the poor lady could ever use her spear.'<sup>15</sup> '... Britain saw a tremendous technical creature rear itself up without it being generally realized that the monster's brain was not commensurate with its body.'<sup>16</sup> Or as Andrew Gordon describes it '... while the Royal Navy was undergoing its fifty year conversion from oak and canvas to steel and turbines, its once-clear, empiricist understanding of "product" was pilfered from the lay-apart store by the vested interest of "process" ...'.<sup>17</sup>

'Thus prior to 1914, naval thinkers and reformers who worked to encourage a broader, more intellectual approach to problems of tactics, strategy, and national policy were dealing with a service whose recent history and whose current sense of urgency were geared to a materialist ethic.'<sup>18</sup> The Royal Navy had gravitated towards the 'material' and the 'mechanical' to the utter neglect of the 'military' and the 'strategic'.<sup>19</sup> Of the naval officers who took issue with this preoccupation and the absolutism of the 'materialist' school, Richmond appeared to be the most persistent, and probably the most formidably intelligent. Richmond 'recoiled at the extremism of futuristic prognostications—of which there were plenty... Basically, he believed it was imprudent to bank on prescience. Wisdom lay in imaginative expectation disciplined by recollection of historical patterns—not just static patterns, but dynamic patterns too, in which not only weapons technology but other sorts of conditions change.'<sup>20</sup>

## His teachings

The Navy 'is first, the statesman's tool, and second, the warrior's weapon. Sea power and naval strength are not always synonymous terms.'

Captain W.V. Pratt, USN July 1923<sup>21</sup>

Admiral Richmond was the ultimate maritime strategic iconoclast. His alleged heresies included challenging World War One British naval strategy and its cherished belief in 'fleet concentration', 'decisive battle' and the materialistic emphasis of the 'big gun ship'. He was an avowed supporter of the convoy system and the necessity to protect trade. He offered support for tri-Service joint command arrangements, emphasised the need for operational planning staff, stressed that maritime power on its own is not an end in itself, addressed the qualitative and quantitative aspects of force structure, and promoted the idea of advancing the higher education of professional naval officers.

His strategic conviction, in 1912, centred on his opposition to the idea that destroying the enemy's battle fleet was the ultimate object of naval strategy. He did not deny its efficacy, and he agreed that if the enemy formed such a fleet then the superior navy should 'disable' the enemy's concentration—render it 'unable to oppose'. However, it was not necessary to destroy it. He argued that the selective positioning of a strong countering force, and reducing the scope of harmful action by seizing the enemy's outlying bases, would achieve the same ends.

Through this argument he gave us the idea of strategic breadth. 'The ultimate aim of sea power [Richmond contends]... was control of the sea; and that control could be achieved only if all the constituent elements of strength at sea were present. Sea power, in other words, is not naval strength, as our modern interpreters suppose, but naval strength is one, and certainly the most important, of the constituents of that larger thing, Sea Power. ... If we are to consider what constitutes sea power we must ... decide what ultimate end sea power exists to attain.'<sup>22</sup> And 'Command of the sea is only useful for the end it serves.'<sup>23</sup> '...control of the sea is not an end in itself. It ... is a means to an end.'<sup>24</sup>

It was therefore a question of emphasis, and too much emphasis on the destruction of the enemy's Battle Fleet led to the situation where, by 1915, Britain had 'now a more complete command of the sea ... than we have possessed in any previous maritime war, and yet we are making less of its special advantage than we ever did.'<sup>25</sup> The alarming losses of mercantile shipping to German submarine attacks post-February 1917, and the Grand Fleet's reluctance to release 100 of its destroyers for convoy duties was the case in point. While the 'materialist' school focused on new technology to counter the German submarine threat, the solution was found in the trade protection policies of the 18th century. The Admiralty's reassignment of destroyers was always minimal, and its 'resistance to mercantile convoy was obdurate. The anxiety and bafflement of the men in charge was evident to everyone in the navy and in government...'<sup>26</sup>

However, Richmond's contribution to strategy was not so much a strategic position, as it was a methodology for intellectual thought. 'It is absolutely necessary to look at the war as a whole, and to avoid being parochial and keeping our eyes on the German Fleet only... The destruction of the German Fleet is a means to an end and not an end in itself.'<sup>27</sup> Richmond taught the complementarity of force, the relation of force to diplomacy, the contingent nature of war, the possible importance of secondary or tertiary matters in strategy, that no single lesson of naval science fits all, and the varieties of ways that navies have been and can be used as instruments of statecraft. He asked to what end would ships be used: the simple question at the heart of naval strategy.

'I have said that a navy is an instrument, designed for a purpose; and when that purpose is clearly known to the designer, it—the navy or the ship—will be useful... A tool is anything whatsoever which is used by an intelligent being for realising its object. The idea of a desired end is inseparable from a tool.'<sup>28</sup>

Richmond was also convinced that a war strategy needed to be formulated against the background of clearly defined objectives. He perceived that the objectives themselves might be in conflict, and that a sense of balance must be imposed in selecting the theatre and timing of conflict. From 1906, he championed the need for 'adequate planning machinery' within the Admiralty to determine and balance these 'objectives'—a Naval War Staff. The concept he proposed was based upon, but not directly analogous to, the Army's General Staff. The Naval War Staff would assist the Board of Admiralty by providing it with war plans based on its own investigations. But this was a heresy that was seen to diminish the power of Sea Lords' authority. And it was on this issue that Richmond 'fell out' with Admiral Fisher. 'Meanwhile nothing is being done. Fisher makes no move ... we have no one trained to think of the problems of war, the organisation required and the multitudinous details. I know only too well how ignorant we are, not only of modern wars but even of wars in History ... Fisher, clever as he is, has not made a study of it, and in reality has no knowledge. He is a genius ... but his predecessors have not been, nor may his successors be geniuses.'<sup>29</sup> Britain would, he felt, drift into war without considering 'what we like to call abstract considerations'.<sup>30</sup>

In 1912 a Naval War Staff was finally created under the direction of the then First Lord, Winston Churchill. However, it did not become an efficiently used or trusted part of the Admiralty for many years. Richmond was in the Naval War Staff before and at the beginning of World War One, but he felt that his ability to influence the war effort was circumscribed by senior officers jealously guarding their own power bases.

As a consequence of this and other 'frustrations' Richmond started selling the idea that the Royal Navy must 'foster clear thought in the rising generation of naval officers, rather than the blind acquiescence in authority.'<sup>31</sup> 'In peace, the dissemination of ideas and their discussion cannot fail to do good to a service bent on improving itself from within.'<sup>32</sup> He deplored 'the system which denies officers opportunity to think or express their ideas. I hate this slavish habit of naval officers and this false idea of loyalty, which is generally not loyalty at all, but cowardice.'<sup>33</sup>

To this end he, and others, formed the idea for a 'correspondence society for propagation of sea-military knowledge'<sup>34</sup> which developed into the Naval Society and eventually published the *Naval Review*.<sup>35</sup> It was initially an instrument for reform through education that, during the war, developed into an instrument for the dissemination of operational experience. From there it grew into an instrument for change.<sup>36</sup> The *Naval Review* acted as an outlet, as a 'percolator for concepts, the time for which is not ripe.' Candour and freedom of discussion were preserved through anonymous contributions—as protection for authors within a disciplined hierarchical system, and as an encouragement for offering criticism without offence—the precursor to the Chatham House Rule.<sup>37</sup>

what I hope to develop is the mental habit of reasoning things out, getting at the bottom of things, evolving principles and spreading interest in the higher side of our work.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

It is in the study, not of the instrument, but of its use that we are deficient; in the study of strategy, tactics and war, and war as a whole.<sup>39</sup>

While changing international geopolitics creates new policy challenges and new potential military adversaries, modern Western navies are generally still technology-based, manpower, and capital intensive institutions which cannot be transformed quickly, and whose basic employment requires a great deal of time and effort to master. Naval strategy today has every tendency to appear, at its root, to be, as Richmond implied, the application of professional 'rationalist' experience to the solution of technical problems. If the Royal Navy's various technical deficiencies in World War One were caused by excessive deference given to the vaunted expertise of the 'materialistic' rationalist, then it seems that we may still have lessons to learn—for example: the British were under air attack in Falkland Sound in 1982 before they discovered the terms on which the Sea Wolf missile computers would accept a target, and ships had to burn before it was re-acknowledged that polyester clothing can melt onto the wearer. Andrew Gordon's 28 blinding glimpses of the obvious<sup>40</sup> 'cut close to the bone' and leave us much to ponder about. Our future may not necessarily be found in the informationalist's cyberspace.

Notwithstanding, command of the sea still needs to be secured, or maintained, before it can safely and effectively be exploited. In today's era of *Pax Americana*,<sup>41</sup> there is an emerging concept of the need to shift the balance between what might be termed 'control' for 'exploitation', to the benefit of the latter. Those concerned with force structure might well conclude that there is now relatively less need for forces intended primarily to win command of the sea and relatively more need for those who intend to use it. This, indeed, appears to be a theme underlying the United States Navy's strategic formulation, '... From the Sea'. And it rises to Richmond's contention, 100 years ago, that 'Command of the sea is only useful for the end it serves' and that we may now have 'a more complete command of the sea ... than we have possessed in any previous maritime war, and yet we are making less of its special advantage than we ever did.'<sup>42</sup>

Admiral Richmond sought to improve the preparation for war of naval officers, and the organisation of the naval service for dealing with war. He considered that the errors of both World Wars were the direct result of lack of proper preparedness and war planning. He was convinced that the complacency producing such difficulties had its roots in a general lack of appreciation for his view that 'national policy war planning and Service preparedness' were continuing and interacting requisites in the life of a healthy state. The purpose of *Statesmen and Sea Power* was to show how statesmen nurtured and used the elements of sea power. The editor of *The Navy as an Instrument of Policy*<sup>43</sup> stated in his preface that Richmond wrote that book to help prevent what he greatly feared—'that what has happened before will repeat itself, and the nation, even if it survives—and the Empire, will again relapse into complacency.' We may be there already.

It is on that note that much of Richmond's intellectually elegant and well-researched writings retain a good deal of utility for modern naval planners—not the least being the need for planning itself. Firstly, much of what he said still seems in itself sensible and relevant. Secondly,

and more importantly, the value of Richmond lies not so much in what he said, but in the spirit of the intellectual rigour and the experience of historical lessons that he drew upon to say it. He raised permanent issues for the reality and application of the naval instrument that furthers our understanding of naval strategy today. And 'his ideas are tools for thought, not substitutes for it'.<sup>44</sup>

'Previously the Royal Navy had produced men capable of understanding, and sometimes of gloriously fulfilling, the role that the state cast for them, but never before had it produced a man with the capacity to explain both the navy to the nation and the nation to the navy: to the mutual advantage of each.'<sup>45</sup>

*Commander McLennan undertook initial training at HMAS Creswell from 1972 to 1976 and initial sea training in HMAS Duchess and HMNZS Taranaki. In 1984 Commander McLennan completed his Principal Warfare Officer's (PWO) course in the United Kingdom at HMS Dryad, before initially being the PWO and later Operations Officer in HMNZS Southland. He was posted to the ANZAC Ship Project in Canberra in late 1991 as the Operational Requirements Officer and the single point of contact for the NATO Sea Sparrow program. In 2000 Commander McLennan joined the RAN Staff College as Directing Staff for six months before being attached to the Australian Command and Staff College (ACSC) Project. While still based in Canberra, 2004 saw him undertaking configuration options studies to align and upgrade the New Zealand and Australian ANZAC Ships.*

## NOTES

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