

**DIXON
WILLIAM
MACNEILE**

THE FLEETS BEHIND THE
FLEET

William Dixon

The Fleets Behind the Fleet

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W. MacNeile Dixon

The Fleets Behind the Fleet / The Work of the Merchant Seamen and Fishermen in the War

FOREWORD

What follows is not written to praise our merchant sailors and fishermen. They are indeed worthy of all praise. But we looked for nothing else than that they would in every circumstance of trial and danger show themselves to be what they are, peerless. At what date or on what occasion in their history have they failed? From a fierier ordeal a firmer courage and a harder resolution have emerged, as we believed it would. Of this the world is already very well aware. Their friends know it and their foes. What remains then is not to praise them but to instruct ourselves. Our vision has been limited. We knew that in the Navy lay our strength, but in our thoughts we defined it as the Royal Navy. Till these troubled years the Merchant Service had for many Englishmen only a shadowy existence. For the first time it has come acutely home to us that "the sea is all one, – the navy is all one." That ships are Britain's treasure, her shipping trade her most vital industry, her sea-faring population her unique possession, the sea itself her partner in her national fortunes, and her merchant sailors the builders of her empire have been facts manifest enough to others, perceived perhaps by Britons in moments of reflection, but how rarely reflected in the full light of national consciousness.

"Thy story, thy glory,
The very fame of thee,
It rose not, it grows not,
It comes not, save by sea."

Let it not be said that we shall do justice to our merchant sailors and fishermen when the history of their doings in these days comes to be written. It will never be written. And for several good and sufficient reasons. Battles on sea or land may be described, great moments in the dreary annals of war. In armies masses of men, in fleets numbers of ships act together, and some picture of the great assault or the heroic defence can be painted in broad outlines. But the ships of the merchant service are solitary wayfarers, scattered units in a waste of waters. The adventures of a thousand ships, the deeds of a thousand skippers, how are these to be set forth in a convenient handbook? On each the sleepless watch, on each the long anxious hours, and for how many of them the same tragic disaster? One record is like another record; one story like another story. And as for their deeds they differ hardly at all. If to meet the crisis as it should be met, with perfect skill and perfect devotion to duty, be heroism, then all are heroes. A hero to-day has for his Valhalla a newspaper paragraph. Many good men have walked the earth as many good sailors have sailed the sea without so much. Men do not always fight and die in the light, and legions of shining acts must remain unsung. With the best will in the world you cannot number the brave men in the world; nor make your battle canvas as huge as you please will you find room in it for all the gallant faces. If it be sad to think that they will be forgotten, it is inspiring to think they are so many. Because courage and resource and determination are everywhere, a single scene or act is nowhere elevated above the rest. The unit is merged in the magnificent total. You will say they form a wonderful series. It is indisputable, but the historian cannot unify such a series or do justice to the individuals who form it. Not this or that exceptional act which chance reveals, but the compact body of its achievement, the pluck, the unshaken heart of the whole service is the impressive thing. So we may put aside the hope that the future will help

us better than the present to appreciate the "captains courageous" who in our time have upheld the long incomparable tradition of British seamen and seamanship. Yet if Britain be persuaded by their deeds to do justice to their successors, which will be nothing more than to do justice to herself, we may believe that even though unrecorded nothing has been lost. In the temple or cathedral or national monument one does not count less essential or less worthy the stones that are hid from view.

OLD SAILORS

With many an old Sailor, on many an old ship,
Who hoisted out many a barrel onto many an old slip,
And went below to his hammock or to a can of flip
Like an old Sailor of the Queen's
And the Queen's old Sailor.

With many an old brave captain we shall never know,
Who walked the decks under the colours when the winds did blow,
And made the planks red with his blood before they carried him below
Like an old Sailor of the Queen's
And the Queen's old Sailor.

And in Davy Jones's Taverns may they sit at ease,
With their old tarpaulin aprons over their old knees,
Singing their old sea ballads and yarning of the seas
Like good old Sailors of the Queen's
And the Queen's old Sailors.

– *From A Sailor's Garland,*
edited by John Masefield.

A MARITIME NATION

*I built the ships and I sailed the ships, and they lie in my havens fair,
With the sea-god's salt on their crusted plates and the green of the sea
nymph's hair;*

*I built the ships and I sailed the ships, on the slack and the flowing tide;
Will ye match my skill in the hulls I build on the narrow seas or wide?
Will ye match my men from the oceans five, or better the work of their
hands*

*From the books that are writ or the tales that are told, the tales of the
hundred lands?*

Cease to think of Britain's naval power in terms of battleships and cruisers and you begin to understand it. Think of it rather in terms of trade routes and navigation, of ship and dockyards, of busy ports and harbours, of a deeply indented coast line, 7,000 miles in length; of great rivers flowing into wide estuaries; of liners and tramps; weatherly east coast trawlers and burly Penzance luggers; of ancient fishing villages looking out from every bay and rocky inlet. Built by nature to be the home of a maritime people, inhabited by the descendants of sea-faring races, accessible only from other lands by water, every stone in the British Isles is fitted into a geographical foundation. Not many of us know it but we are none the less children of the sea and live by it. We are its captives and masters, imprisoned by it and forcing it to serve our needs. In the language daily on our lips are phrases salt as the ocean itself – we "make headway" and "weather a difficulty"; we are "taken aback," or "out of soundings" or have "the wind taken out of our sails," or discern "rocks ahead," or find "another shot in the locker." To the people who made this language the sea has been the "nursing mother." View it thus, and the Royal Navy becomes no more than a symbol, the expression of a peculiar national life. Science may think of it as the tough exterior hide, the armour, like that of the dinosaur, with which nature in the process of evolution provides her mightiest creatures. It is in fact simply the glittering shaft on the string of a powerful bow, the power is in the bow and not the arrow. Any one can see that the mere possession of a fleet cannot bestow naval power. The Royal Navy occupies indeed to-day the centre of the picture, yet without the vast and supporting background of arsenals, building yards, docks, harbours, bases, a fleet is nothing. Behind it lives, moves and has its being, the great maritime nation – an organisation of extreme complexity with its coal and iron mines, its manufactories, its endless machinery and, far above all, its age-long tradition and experience of the sea. View it historically, and the Royal Navy is the heir of the Merchant Service, the inheritor of its fighting spirit and tradition. Not till Victoria's reign was any clear line of division drawn between the merchant sailor and the man-of-war's-man. Both stood together in the nation's first line of defence during the critical moments of its history, when Philip planned his great *coup*, and Napoleon bestrode the world like a Colossus. And now that the fiery wheel of fate has revolved once more and swept the peoples into the maelstrom of war, history repeats itself, and the mariners of England from the merchant and fishing fleets are fighting men once more as in the old and famous days.

Histories, as they have too often been written, obscure the vision and provide a false perspective. Faithful chronicles no doubt of the red-letter days of battle, but how few and far between were the battles in our long naval wars! Too often the histories speak of the Navy as if it were a thing apart, a mere fighting instrument, and forget to tell us of the fleets behind the fleet; of the merchant sailors and the fishermen, the pioneers and the builders of our sea-supported confederacy. These "traders," it was said of the Elizabethan seamen, "escaped the notice of kings and chroniclers." Nevertheless it was these men who saved England and America from becoming provinces of Spain. We Englishmen forget, if we have ever considered and known, that in all their naval enterprises, and they have not been few, the country invariably called upon her merchantmen and fisher folk; upon all her resources

in men and ships. The "navy," as we call it, what has history to say of it? That until the reign of Henry VIII, the pious founder of the Royal Navy, it was, in fact, neither more nor less than England's mercantile marine. As for Elizabeth's tall ships and proud captains, Drake and Hawkins and Frobisher and many another, they were stout merchant skippers, and of the fleet which met the Great Armada, near upon 200 sail, but 34 belonged to the Queen's Navy. In that expedition to Cadiz, too, which singed the whiskers of His Majesty of Spain, not more than 5 or 6 in a fleet of 40 vessels were men-of-war. In its palmy days the Merchant Navy was accustomed and very well able to look after itself, and not seldom lent a hand in the affairs of magnitude and importance. Trading and fighting indeed went together; buccaneers and privateers abounded, and the line between war and peace was negligently drawn. Peace there might be on land, but never a year passed, never a month, for that matter, without its encounters at sea.

Through the 17th and 18th centuries it was much the same. Britain's "navy" consisted of little more than merchantmen and their crews; for themselves and for her they traded; for themselves and for her they fought. As the records show, officers of the Royal Navy on half-pay or the retired list were not too proud to go to sea in command of merchantmen; a practice which continued till the crowning year 1815. On the "glorious first of June" 1796, the merchant service won his victory for Lord Howe, and the fleets of Hood and Nelson must have employed not less than 50,000 men, who learnt their sea-going and their fighting as fishermen or traders. Nelson himself – symbol let it be of the inseparable fellowship – served his apprenticeship on a merchantman, and in those days service afloat, whether in king's ship or trader, counted for promotion in the Royal Navy. As for fighting, no one ever complained that the men of the merchant service shrank from undertaking that business, or fell short in the performance of it.

It was a merchant ship, the *Mountjoy*, that in 1689 under the fire of the shore batteries led the vessels sent to the relief of Derry. She rammed and shattered the boom, forced the barrier, and raised the historic siege. "To prevent all thoughts among my men of surrendering ye ship," wrote the commander of the *Chambers*, an East India merchant vessel in 1703, when attacked by a French 64 and a frigate, "I nailed the ensigne to the staff from head to foot, and stapled and forecockt the ensigne staff fast up. I resolved to part with ship and life together." In 1804 the East India Company's fleet in the China Seas engaged, beat off and pursued a powerful squadron of war vessels which contained 2 frigates and a line-of-battle ship of 74 guns, under the Comte de Linois. As for transport, how many expeditions of British soldiers have been ferried by British merchantmen? A fleet of no less than 90 vessels took part in the great expedition to the Crimea in 1854, which carried 30,000 men and 3,000 horses to the distant seat of war; while in 1860 two hundred vessels transported troops to China. "I do not remember," wrote Lord Wolseley, "having witnessed a grander sight than our fleet presented when steering for the Peiho. All ships were under full sail, the breeze being just powerful enough to send them along at about 5 knots an hour, and yet no more than rippled the sea's surface, which shone with all the golden hues of a brilliant sunshine. The ships were in long lines, one vessel behind the other, with a man-of-war leading each line... Looking upon that brilliant naval spectacle I could scarcely realise the fact of being some 16,000 miles from England."

During the South African War, conducted 6,000 miles from home, almost a million soldiers were carried across the seas, and about a million tons of stores. Hundreds of trading vessels were then employed. To-day we may count these elementary operations, for the fighting navy held the sea, and better parallels to the work of our merchant seamen in these times may be found in our earlier wars.

Gradually indeed during the last 100 years, the services drew apart. Gradually the Board of Trade usurped the control of the Royal prerogative exercised through the Admiralty, of the nation's shipping; but the hand of war has turned back the leaves, and Britain's naval power has again to be calculated, as it should never have ceased to be calculated, in the broad terms of men and ships; the extent and efficiency not of this service or that, but of the assembled and fraternal society of the sea. In its charge to-day is the destiny of the nations.

It is a good story, that of the British sailor in the long centuries that lie between us and Beowulf, the first seafarer and warrior in the 7th century, of which our literature tells. And if ever there was a tale to catch the ear it lies to the hand of the future historian of the Merchant Marine, for without it, without the resolution and enterprise with which it espoused the country's cause, the story were long since ended. That is the gist of the matter, and argument about it there can be none. Not for a moment is it disputable that despite all its immense resources and striking power the Grand Fleet could not have saved Europe or Britain as they have been saved from ruinous defeat. Without her merchant sailors, without her fisher-folk in this war as waged with a cunning and ruthless foe, the life blood of Britain would inevitably have ebbed away drop by drop, a creeping and fatal paralysis overtaken her. Had her merchant sailors faltered, had her fisher-folk been less resolute, had their old qualities not sprung forth to meet the new and deadly perils, the destiny of the world would have been other than it will be. Not once or twice have they thus stood across the dragon's path. History, then, repeats itself, but on a scale by sea and land that dwarfs even the spacious days when the Armada sailed from Spain, or Nelson scoured the Mediterranean. History repeats itself, but with a difference. The incidence of the pressure and the strain, protracted, exhausting, of this war, has been less directly upon the Grand Fleet, equal and more than equal to all that it has been called upon to perform. The incidence of the pressure has fallen, as it has always fallen, upon those men who were not by profession of the fighting company; upon ships and men engaged till the fateful year 1914 in peaceful callings; toilers of the deep who rolled round the world on the trade routes, or pursued the whale south of the equatorial line, or dragged their heavy trawls through the cold seas of the north.

It is no new thing then for men of the merchant service to man their guns and fight their ships. And not for the first time has Britain mobilised all her maritime resources. Never before, however, in a fashion so far-reaching or so impressive. Her previous history is written over again but in larger characters. Never before have her merchant navies been called upon to support so stupendous an operation, to carry almost the whole weight of transport and supplies for millions of fighting men. Since ships are the railroads of the Allies; since without ships neither soldiers nor guns can reach the distant seats of war; since without them Britain herself cannot hope to sustain her life – ships and sailors have been and are, as they have been in the past, the first and last and utterly essential element.

None but a great maritime people, however powerful its fighting fleets, could have faced or upheld for a week the gigantic undertaking. We speak of an empire of thirteen million square miles, of four hundred millions of inhabitants. We should speak of it as an empire of ships and sailors, an empire of tonnage – 20 millions of it – carrying the weight of half the world's goods, a voyaging empire, in everlasting motion on the seas, that in days of peace serves every race and country —

To give the poles the produce of the sun,
And knit the unsocial climates into one.

that unites in a close-wrought texture the whole fabric of civilisation, links island to island, continent to continent; a prodigious network of travel. The empire of ships, that has brought the East to meet the West, sought out the far and foreign lands; enabled China and India and the Isles to interchange ideas and gifts with Europe, is not the fleet of battleships but that other which, in times of peace, extended in a fashion no other instrument has ever rivalled, and enriched beyond arithmetic the intercourse and resources of mankind.

THE KEY-STONE OF THE ARCH

*These are the men who sailed with Drake,
Masters and mates and crew:
These are the men, and the ways they take
Are the old ways through and through;
These are the men he knew.*

The communications of the Great Alliance – it is their point of vulnerability – are sea communications, and if that key-stone slips

"Rome in Tiber melts, and the wide arch
Of the ranged Empire falls."

From the first the Central Powers held the splendid advantage of the interior and shorter lines. Theirs were the spokes of the wheel, the spokes along which run the railways. On the circumference of the wheel held by the Alliance, on the rim of ocean, went and came all things – men and the interminable machinery of war. The Allied and far longer lines therefore on the arc of an immense circle traverse the sea from Archangel to Gibraltar; from Gibraltar to Suez or the Cape; from Suez to Colombo; from Colombo to Melbourne; from Melbourne to Vladivostok. Nothing less was here required than a railroad belting the globe, whose rolling stock was ships. And the problem faced by Britain, as the great maritime partner in the alliance of 1913, remains essentially a problem of sea transport, and transport on a scale wholly without parallel in the world's history. Since Britain herself had never dreamt of raising an army of five million men, provision for the bridge of boats required for such numbers, with all their battle apparatus, had found no place in her plans. But she had ships and sailors.

"We have just returned here after making three trips with troops from Southampton to France," wrote an officer. "It was really marvellous work. Southampton was full of troop ships and like clock work they were handled. Every ship had a number allotted to her and a special signal. One ship would arrive alongside, fill up her holds and decks, and, in less than half-an-hour, she was away again. As soon as they got one vessel off her berth, up would go the signal for another steamer to take her place, and so the work went on. Ship followed ship off the port like a line of vessels manœuvring. Orders came for 94 to go alongside. Up went the signal, and in less time than it takes one to write, we were following the rest."

The ferrying of vast human and material cargoes across the Channel – an undertaking one might think serious enough – was in fact a trifle compared with the undertaking as a whole; for, since the recruiting areas for Britain's forces lay in every latitude, there fell within it the transference of great bodies of troops from Australia and New Zealand across 10,000 miles of ocean, from India across 6,000 miles; from Canada, more than 2,000 miles away, and not, be it remembered, a transference to Britain or France only but to Egypt, the Persian Gulf, the Dardanelles, Salonika; a transference continuous, unending, processional.

"It is not only a war with Germany," said Sir Edward Carson. "You have a war – a naval war – going on over the whole of the seas – war in the Channel, war in the Atlantic, war in the Pacific, war in the Mediterranean, war round Egypt, war in the Adriatic, war in Mesopotamia, war at Salonika, and day by day the Navy is called upon to supply the material for carrying on all these wars. Did anybody ever contemplate a war of that kind? When I mention one figure to you that at the commencement of the war we had something like 150 small vessels for patrol work, and now we have something like 3,000, you will see the gigantic feat that has been accomplished by the Navy. In all these theatres

of war we have to provide patrols, convoys, mine-sweepers, mine-layers, air service, mine-carriers, fleet messengers."

Owing to the demands of the Royal Navy upon the shipyards additions to mercantile tonnage were out of the question. With the ordinary resources of peace the vast unapprehended responsibilities of war had to be met. There was no other way. Besides the armies and the great guns, the various belligerent zones called for hundreds of miles of railroad with engines and rolling stock complete; horses and mules and their fodder; cargoes of wood for trench making; river boats in sections for the Persian Gulf; motor lorries, literally in thousands; material and food for whole moving populations and their multiform activities.

"During the last five or six weeks," said Sir William Robertson on May 12, "we have expended no less than 200,000 tons of munitions in France alone, and we have taken out some 50,000 tons of stones for making and mending roads." "Everything has been taken ashore," wrote an officer on transport service in the East, "by lighters and rafts. The major part of our cargo is railway material, cattle trucks, ambulance vans, oxen, horses, mules, fodder, ammunition and troops. We have a mixture of everything necessary for warfare from 'a needle to an elephant.'"

Think also of the coal, carried overseas to the Allies; nitrates shipped from South, munitions from North America; ore from Spain and the Mediterranean; and contemplate the dizzy shuffling on the high seas of these mighty freights. All the while the needs of peace remained inexorable. The sugar and the wheat, the cotton, coffee and all the other requirements of the home population of these islands had still unceasingly to be provided. The mind refuses to calculate in these dimensions; our foot-rules will not measure them. Let us however write down the unthinkable figures. Eight millions of men; ten million tons of supplies and explosives; over a million sick and wounded; over a million horses and mules; fifty million gallons of petrol alone. These of course are merely the additional undertakings of war. To complete the picture one has to include ordinary imports and exports, such trifles as 100 million hundredweights of wheat; seven million tons of iron ore; 21 million centals of cotton – the figures for 1916. For the same 12 months the value of the home products *exported* was 500 millions. British ships have been busy in these thundering years!

But the Allies, you will say, assisted. France had 360 ocean-going vessels; Italy about the same number; Russia 174; Belgium 67. No doubt, yet these nations were nevertheless borrowers, not lenders. Their ships were far from sufficient for their own necessities, and to France, Britain despite her own searching requirements, lent about 600 ships, to Italy about 400, a sixth of her own far from adequate supply. "Without our Mercantile Marine the Navy – and indeed – the nation – could not exist," said Admiral Jellicoe. One perceives the truth of it. But the tale does not end there. About a hundred merchant ships were commissioned as auxiliary cruisers, and armed with guns like the *Carmania* took their share in the fighting. The *Empress of Japan* captured the collier *Exford*, the *Macedonia* rounded up the transports accompanying Von Spee, the *Orama* was in at the death of *Dresden*. Colliers too are needed for the Royal Navy; supply and repair ships; auxiliaries for the fighting flotillas and the great blockade patrol. Extending from the Shetlands to the coast of Greenland and the Arctic ice a wide net had to be flung whose meshes were British ships. And yet again in the narrow seas and in the defiles of the trade routes, day in day out, the British trawlers – fleets of them – swept for the German mines.

What were, in fact, the maritime resources that made these things at all possible? At the outbreak of war Britain possessed over 10,000 ships, and of these about 4,000 ocean-going ships were over 1,600 tons; of smaller ocean traders there were about 1,000. Add to these the fishing trawlers and drifters, over 3,000 of which are now in Government employ. Gradually the traders were requisitioned, at first for military then for national purposes. Sugar was the first article for which Government took responsibility, first and early. Then came wheat, maize, rice and other grains. To these were added month by month many other commodities of which the authorities took charge and for which they found the necessary tonnage. The pool of free ships diminished, contracted to narrow

limits and finally dried up. Britain's shipping virtually passed in 1916 wholly under national control. That is in brief the history of the ships; but what of the crews? What of the men and their willingness to serve under war conditions, surrounded by deadly risks. If we include over 100,000 fishermen, the marine population of the empire may be reckoned at not less than 300,000 men. Of these 170,000 are British seamen; 50,000 are Lascars, and 30,000 belong to other nationalities. There you have the absolute total of sea-farers, to whose numbers, owing to their way of life and the peculiarity of their profession it is impossible during war rapidly or greatly to add. No other reservoir of such skill and experience as theirs can anywhere be found. Perhaps the most valuable community in the world to-day and certainly irreplaceable. Means of replenishing it there is none. A Royal Commission appointed in 1858 reported that the nation "possesses in the Merchant Service elements of naval power such as no other Government enjoys," and in 1860 the Royal Naval Reserve Act was passed, by which the Royal Naval Volunteers became the Royal Naval Reserve, and a force enrolled which, though inadequate in numbers, has proved of inestimable value. The Royal Naval Reserve man signs on for a term of 5 years; undergoes each year a short period of training, and reports himself twice a year to the authorities. While in training he receives navy pay and a retaining fee of £4.10. a year during service as a merchant seaman. Twenty years' service qualifies for a pension and a medal. Belonging to this force there were at the outbreak of the war about 18,500 officers and men available, but the number of merchant sailors and fishermen serving with the combatant forces has been trebled and now stands at 62,500. Add to these another 100,000 merchant sailors who, since they share all the risks of a war with an enemy that makes no distinction between belligerents and non-combatants, may well be included among Britain's defenders, and one begins to perceive the true nature and extent of the nation's maritime resources and the utter dependence upon these resources of an island kingdom – the vulnerable heart of a sea sundered empire. In 1893 the Imperial Merchant Service Guild had been established, a body, the value of whose services, already notable, cannot yet be fully calculated. To it, and to the profession it represents, the nation will yet do justice. For the professional skill and invincible courage of her merchant seamen has at length made clear to Britain the secret of her strength; the knowledge that to them she owes her place and power in the world. She has found in them the same skill and the same courage with which their forefathers sailed and fought in all the country's earlier wars. "The submarine scare," said the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, "has struck England with paralysing effect, and the whole sea is as if swept clean at one blow." To this one answers that the sailing of no British ship has been delayed by an hour by fear of the submarine menace. If the sea be indeed swept clear of ships how strange that every week records its batch of victims! A sufficient testimony, one would think, to their presence, and, might not one add, of equal eloquence in their praise. It was assumed – a magnificent assumption – that a British crew could never fail. It never did. The *Vedamore* was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland, and most of her crew killed or drowned. In wild and wintry weather the survivors, 16 in all, after many hours' exposure in open boats, made a successful landing. These 16 reached London and proposed, you will say, to snatch a few days' rest, a little comfort after their miseries. Their object was a different one: – to ask for a new ship. "Had enough?" one of the crew of the torpedoed *Southland* was asked, when he came ashore. "Not me," he replied, "I shall be off again as soon as I can find a berth." "If," said one torpedoed seaman, "there were fifty times the number of submarines it wouldn't make no difference to us. While there's a ship afloat there will be plenty to man her. My mates and I were torpedoed a fortnight ago and just as soon as we get another ship we shall be off." She has her faults, has Britain, but she still breeds men: And mothers of men. Take the authentic circumstance of the vessel whose crew was not of British stock. They declined when safely in port to undertake another and risky voyage. But there appeared to them next day an Englishwoman, the Captain's wife, with the announcement, perhaps unwelcome, that she proposed on that trip to accompany her husband. She went; and with her, for their manhood's sake, the reluctant crew.

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