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The Difficulties of an Admiralty Reformer in the later Nineteenth Century: The case of E.N. Swainson

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It was seen as entirely typical of Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery's arrogance and egotism that he was once supposed to have said: 'As God said, and - I think - rightly...' Similarly self-revealing, though this time questioning the authority of only the Lords Commissioners of the Board of Admiralty, were the words that their Assistant Secretary - E.N. Swainson - chose to begin a minute with in October 1884: 'This is a question of difference of opinion. The Admiralty held in 1869, rightly, I think...' ¹ On this occasion, Mr Swainson was not rebuked, at least on paper, but he was not always so fortunate. For another example let us look to a long minute by him from some five years earlier. This time, someone has gone over the first page of the minute and in heavy pencil underscored all the occasions - admittedly numerous - where Swainson had used the first person singular. ²

The two minutes show great confidence, even over-confidence and self-assertion, and were exceptional for a civil servant of the time, but appear to be only too typical of the man in question. Many of Swainson's other minutes show the same tendency to push himself forward. Explanations for his behaviour might be found in his being abandoned as a child. Edwin Newcome

Swainson was born in 1833, his mother died two years later, and he lost the rest of his immediate family in 1840. His father William - gifted, but difficult and obsessive - remarried and emigrated to New Zealand, taking with him all his children except Edwin, who was seen as too young for the voyage.³ However, one should be cautious about emphasising Edwin's deprivation. He was adopted by a prosperous childless couple, the Fields, and inherited most of the husband's estate in 1846, the widow being urged in the will to make her main remaining duty the establishment of the boy in a career.⁴ As it happens, though, the career seems to have been largely in other hands. Edwin's mother might have died, but her brothers had not. One of them was Joseph Parkes, an important Radical politician. It was surely his patronage that obtained Edwin a third-class clerkship at the Admiralty in 1853, when the Whig-Peelite coalition was in government. By then, the young man had already served an unsalaried apprenticeship of two and a half years in the Census Office, but now he had a tenured position in the Admiralty Secretariat, the department immediately responsible to the two Secretaries to the Board of Admiralty. The post was adequately paid, and brought a pension. Though still young, Swainson had obtained what looked like a safe berth for life.

Necessarily, his early Admiralty work is lost to the historian's sight. There was then no streaming of civil service entrants, no accelerated promotion for the talented. For many years his main duties were those of simple copy-clerk, where all that was wanted were accuracy and assiduity; the researcher might encounter Admiralty dispatches from this time in Swainson's handwriting, but he had not drafted them, and he contributed no significant minutes. Advancement in the office was through seniority, so Swainson could only slowly and painstakingly climb the rungs of promotion, going from the second to the first section of the third class of clerkship and then similarly through the second class. By the start of 1870, he was about to be appointed an acting first class clerk.

The years 1869-1870 were a time of change at the Admiralty. The new First Lord, H.C.E. Childers, wished to reduce costs and increase efficiency, and giving priority to talent was one route. The greatest sign of this was the introduction of open competition for the entry of clerks - a far cry from

the entry by patronage of 1853. Childers left the Admiralty in 1871, but pressures for reform of the naval civil service remained. One came from committees of inquiry, in particular a commission under the presidency of Lyon Playfair, which recommended separating clerks in all departments of state into two divisions, the higher of which was to have more responsible work.⁵ Reform was also being pressed from the Treasury, which was already emerging as the co-ordinator of Whitehall. Furthermore, the Treasury Permanent Secretary - the formidable Sir Ralph Lingen - had effectively taken up the position (to be officially recognised only after the First World War) as Head of the Civil Service. This meant there were great opportunities in government departments for forward-looking clerks, willing to grasp at fortune. On 1 April 1875 Swainson had been promoted into the new grade of Principal Clerk, which itself meant he had greater responsibilities, but two years later he had a further chance to impress his superiors thanks to the setting up of a joint Treasury-Admiralty inquiry. The Treasury had been the primary moving force behind it, the purpose being to revise the clerical staff of all the Admiralty departments, bar the Secretariat, in the interests of economy and efficiency. There was only one naval man on the committee proper, the Civil Lord, Sir Massey Lopes; along with him were R.G.C. Hamilton (one of the secretaries of the Board of Trade), and Lingen. The committee secretary, though, was Mr Swainson. A report was drawn up, and printed on 14 January 1878. It contained crucial proposals for the greater stratification of duties, especially through preventing Higher Division (H.D.) Clerks from doing banal work, so the number of these more expensive officials could be reduced. Also, the bureaucrats were to work harder: new entry Lower Division (L.D.) clerks were to face a seven hour day (from 10 to 5), not the six hours previously customary. The First Lord, W.H. Smith, accepted the main proposals, and they went into force.⁶

As secretary to the committee, Swainson had the responsibility merely to minute and draft the conclusions of others. But we can gather from what he wrote elsewhere at this time that he thoroughly approved of the report. In March 1878 he used very strong words to support the segregation of work according to grade: it was, he said 'a wrong and an extravagant system' to let

the H.D. and L.D. mix their work.⁷ We should look also at what he wrote about the committee set up in 1879 to investigate the Secretariat. The membership was largely the same as the 1878 committee - including Lingen. But this time Swainson was not the secretary; it was likely seen as improper that a member of the department being investigated should so act. Instead, a senior Treasury clerk had the task - which just made manifest the true departmental bias underlying these investigations. Nevertheless, even if he was no longer directly associated with the committee, even though one can see it as representing a non-Admiralty interest, Swainson energetically pushed its proposals.

Again, the segregation of duties was in question. It was now the work of the Secretariat H.D. clerks that was to be purged, with banal duties delegated to juniors. Again, as a result, some expensive posts could be reduced. Once more the Admiralty accepted the report, at least in the main. It was made clear to the men in the offices that only the more efficient clerks would be retained. The Treasury had offered somewhat enhanced early pensions to volunteers, and a number of men took the opportunity to leave, some of them surely fearing the only alternative was to be dismissed on less favourable conditions.

But three men with poor records refused to jump in time, and were picked out by a small office committee. One then went without further fuss; but the other two still wanted to stay, and they were viewed sympathetically by some of their seniors. One of the two, Mr Sydney Dacres, appears to have won some favour because he was the son of a former Senior Naval Lord. His case led to active minuting, where we again find evidence of Mr Swainson's attachment to principles of administrative reform, and also again a touch of fierce zeal. Swainson wrote on 16 February 1880: 'it would be disastrous to the Office to retain men in the Department who would not be qualified for promotion beyond the junior class.' He also made it quite clear it would be contrary to the recommendations of the committee into the Secretariat. He even suggested it might endanger an understanding with the Treasury that the reduction of H.D. clerks would make it possible to increase the salary of those who remained. The following month, in a four page minute for the First Lord, he asserted the committee's preferences even

more forcefully. W.H. Smith had wanted to recruit one man to the Secretariat from the intake of new civil service entrants. Swainson pointed out the committee had said they preferred candidates for the Secretariat in future to be drawn from those already working in other naval departments, and the Admiralty, he added, had promised to adopt the committee's recommendations. He did not think the Treasury would willingly accept any other form of recruitment. But the First Lord proved recalcitrant, minuting in reply that he still proposed to accept one new entrant. Swainson's anticipations were shown to be correct when, two weeks later, an official letter arrived from the Treasury, delicately suggesting a link between higher salaries and what had been agreed about Secretariat recruitment. Smith promptly capitulated.⁸

We see Swainson's commitment to the principles of the 1879 committee even more strikingly in one other respect - one where he was deeply involved personally. The committee had proposed abolishing the post of Secretariat Chief Clerk, and instead giving an extra £200 a year to the head of one of the branches to superintend the whole department and to act for the Secretary in his absence. The Admiralty accepted this idea on 8 December 1879, subject to one addition approved by the Treasury: the head of the branch concerned was given the title of Assistant Secretary.⁹ The new post had been mooted for some time, and had already given rise to some potent lobbying by Swainson. Not only had he written on 27 November to Smith to request the post, but two days earlier had asked Lingen to intervene with Smith on his behalf.

In his letter to Lingen, Swainson portrayed himself as a reformer combating the forces of entrenched opposition:

*There are men senior to me in the Office, and I have good reason to believe that considerable pressure may be, and indeed has already been, brought to bear on the First Lord, with a view to my exclusion from the post; but I think that if the First Lord knew how consistently I have been working to bring about reforms in this Office, while those above me have been doing all they can to stifle inquiry and prevent reorganization, he would be disposed to entrust to me the task of carrying the new scheme into operation.*¹⁰

The letter also suggests the correspondents had known each other even before the 1878 committee. Lingen had apparently been acquainted with Swainson's work for some years. He certainly proved willing to write to Smith as requested, and did so at once, enclosing Swainson's letter. His covering note was positive, though not without a certain reserve. He said Swainson was:

... full of energy and intelligence. Mismanagement for which he has a keen eye, kindles in him the spirit of reform. I should not let him out of hand, or sight - but I should use him, & I should think myself lucky in having in him a rather rare instrument for official purposes. Safe men are sometimes a little slow, especially if they constitute an unmixed group of safe men.

Lingen saw another advantage in the promotion. He thought Swainson's name was identified in the Admiralty with the changes made, and

*... his promotion would stamp them with official approval & lead all men to reflect that it will pay better to promote than thwart them. There is no child's play to be performed in reforming so old an office. The present methods are as senseless as they can be.*¹¹

Swainson's letter to the First Lord, on 27 November, covered much the same ground as the one to Lingen, for instance again emphasising possible departmental opposition to him. But he made more of his deserts. He said he had been trying for over ten years to re-organise Admiralty work more rationally, and had submitted a paper on the subject when Smith became First Lord (which occurred in August 1877) - at the same time sending Lingen a copy. Also, in 1878 he had submitted a scheme for revised salaries, staffs, and work, nearly identical to the one now approved. As he pretty well said, his reforming work meant the Assistant Secretaryship was his due.¹² The arguments, and the lobbying, sufficed. On 12 December 1879 Swainson got his promotion.

At least one man reacted with fury - C.N. Kempe, the head of the Military ('M') branch in the Secretariat. Back in 1853 he had entered the office only two days ahead of Swainson, but that small if crucial initial advantage gradually translated into a substantial lead. In a system governed by seniority, a promotion would usually be given in the office only after someone had vacated a

post through retirement. But then there might well be a long interval before a recurrence - and, thanks to the age structure of the office, these intervals got longer as time went on. Since he was the senior - if only just - Kempe got promotion first, and could enjoy each successive step-up for longer and longer periods before Swainson managed to get up to his level again. Kempe was promoted acting second-class clerk six months before Swainson, but by the time he got to first class clerk the lead had opened to two years. In a sense he had thus become greatly the senior, and he felt himself quite insulted when Swainson jumped over him to become Assistant Secretary. So he took early retirement. Once he had left the office, he felt able to expend some bile in a letter to the First Lord. 'I had the mortification', he wrote, 'of seeing a junior colleague advanced to the post who in the opinion of those acquainted with his official career, possessed no special qualifications for it, but who had had special opportunities for exhibiting reforming tendencies which others had not enjoyed....' He suggested also some personal animus against the First Lord. He was, he told Smith, a voter in Smith's constituency of Westminster. Despite also being a Conservative, Kempe went on, he had hesitated to vote for Smith at the recent election, since he believed the reorganisation of the Secretariat, 'and the consequent extinction of public Servants', had been inconsistent with the beliefs of their party: only in the end, with reluctance he suggested, did he vote as usual. Smith replied, regretting that Kempe had gone, thanking him for his help over the years, adding there was nothing personal in the decision about the Assistant Secretaryship: interestingly, he said he certainly did not appoint the man with whom he was on 'the most friendly or intimate terms'. Kempe does not seem to have written again, but settled into retirement. He continued at the same address for the next twenty-five years, dying in 1904.¹³ Kempe, one gathers, was one of the 'safe men' Lingen had referred to. He personified not just a belief in advancement by seniority as against merit, but - despite his acerbic comment about Swainson having opportunities not open to others, (presumably the secretaryship to the 1878 committee) - was by no means a reformer. His departure, one might think, was one sign that administrative reform had thoroughly entered the Admiralty. Another, of course, was Mr Swainson's

elevation. He seemed to have reached 'the top of the greasy pole' in the Admiralty, at least as far as civil servants were concerned, something he had been aiming at for some time, perhaps even from the day he had entered the office over twenty-six years previously.

II

As it happens, what constituted the top of the civil service pole in the Admiralty was soon to alter. The post of Secretary had undergone various changes over the previous decades. Back in 1853 there had been still two heads to the Secretariat, the First (or Parliamentary) Secretary and the Second (or Permanent) Secretary. The former was a political appointee, changing with the government. The latter, since at least 1830, was a permanent civil servant, what would have been called in certain other departments of state the permanent under-secretary. Only in 1869 was it decided that he alone should head the Secretariat, his colleague taking other, largely financial duties. There were further changes over the next decade, culminating in 1878 with the Permanent Secretary being replaced by a naval officer, under the title of Naval Secretary. Many observers approved, thinking it only right that the man in charge of the chief administrative unit under the Board of Admiralty should be someone with an intimate and personal knowledge of the sea and naval habits. But others disagreed strongly, including Lingen, who believed that the Treasury model of a permanent secretary - a civil servant - being in charge of departmental administration should be followed elsewhere in Whitehall. Thus, the 1879 committee strongly recommended that in future the Admiralty should appoint a civilian.

It seems all too likely that Swainson envisaged himself as the proper successor. But, if so, he was to be disappointed. In May 1882, the Naval Secretary, Admiral Robert Hall, retired, and there was another man who by his administrative talent and experience seemed eminently fitted to succeed - R.G.C. Hamilton, a former member of the committees of 1878 and 1879, though by now Accountant-General of the Navy. He was appointed, but almost immediately there was an urgent need to replace the Irish Secretary (murdered in Phoenix Park, 6

May 1882), and Hamilton went to Dublin. Hall was hurriedly brought back into service, but died in June, and to replace him at short notice, the First Lord appointed Captain George Tryon. Though a naval officer, he was given the title of Permanent Secretary, evincing at least a partial return to the civilian principle. It was understood, though, that he would not serve for long. In a year or two he was due for promotion to flag rank, and it was not now thought suitable to have an admiral as Secretary; but at least the First Lord would be given time to think of a more permanent appointee.

A decision had to be made in early 1884, and this time someone was chosen from the Secretariat. But it was still not Swainson. Instead Evan MacGregor was picked. Both men were Principal Clerks; both headed Secretariat branches (Swainson the Legal Branch; MacGregor had succeeded Kempe in 'M' Branch). Otherwise, Swainson was clearly senior: he was Assistant Secretary, and had entered the Admiralty seven years earlier. Nevertheless, MacGregor became Secretary. In 1879 Swainson had personified the principle of merit in the Admiralty, as against seniority. Four years later he was trumped.¹⁴

We can begin to understand the reasons behind the choice when we look at the letter about it written by the First Lord, by now Lord Northbrook, to the Prime Minister, W.E. Gladstone. He admitted MacGregor was not as able a man as Sir Robert [R.G.C.] Hamilton, but said the latter had few equals in the public service. Furthermore, since 'M' branch was 'the principal executive' branch of the office, MacGregor 'has more experience in the executive work of the Admiralty which forms the most important part of the duties of the Secretary...'¹⁵ Of course, Northbrook's comment raises a question here. Kempe, it will be remembered, had been head of 'M' and yet had been passed over for the Assistant Secretaryship. Circumstances had then been a little different, though. In 1879 the Secretary had been a naval officer, so had less need for an assistant who had been in close touch with naval executive matters. To head the Secretariat in 1884, on the other hand, it perhaps seemed a reasonable compromise to choose a careful administrator who - though a civilian - was used to dealing closely with naval officers. Northbrook's letter raises one other relevant concern, as well. In it

he briefly surveyed the field; he not just mentioned Hamilton and MacGregor, but also said he had looked without success outside the Admiralty for a candidate. It seems pointed that the name of the Assistant Secretary does not appear at all.

One can understand that Swainson might not have been regarded as entirely a suitable candidate for the top post. Smith had promoted him to the Assistantship, but even he had not been on friendly or intimate terms with him. And one wonders how he reacted to Swainson's closeness to the Treasury, or at least to Treasury interests. The incident over the new entrant Smith wanted for the Secretariat might have suggested that Swainson was more faithful to the Treasury spirit than to that of his proper department, though there seems to be no suggestion he had actually prompted Lingen behind the scenes about what the First Lord was trying to do. Lingen, too, was not a whole-hearted supporter: as we have seen, he thought Swainson very useful, but someone who needed superintendence. Northbrook's attitude to him is unknown, except we know he chose MacGregor, and thus it is relevant to try to discern more about the characteristics of the latter. On those, we can turn to the biography of MacGregor written for the original *Dictionary of National Biography* by Sir Vincent Baddeley, who had served at the Admiralty under him. Baddeley made two points about MacGregor's limitations as a naval administrator. First, that he had no great interest in finance, (where Baddeley had much experience, and which he rightly saw as the key to power in the civil administration of the Admiralty in the twentieth century). More relevant to present purposes, Baddeley also said MacGregor would not press his own views forward on policy matters, but was a faithful servant of the Board of Admiralty.¹⁶ Here was the kind of man the First Lord wanted as Permanent Secretary and not - by extension - Swainson.

One final point can be drawn from Northbrook's letter. He wrote that 'from the opinions entertained of him in the office', MacGregor would 'manage the department well.' This at least offers us the hint to try to assess Swainson's reputation among his peers and juniors. We can begin with the antagonism between Swainson and Kempe. That is perhaps only too easy to understand. They had entered the office only days apart, were known to each other

for many years, and all that time been engaged in a curious form of competition where the original sin of first appointment was all-powerful, and talent irrelevant. One might imagine how this intimacy could have engendered the kind of deep-rooted loathing so beautifully dramatised in Robert Browning's *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*. Why should communities of British civil servants be much less likely than Spanish monks to generate long-maturing enmities; might there have been muttered imprecations of 'Gr-r-r - you swine!' not just in cloisters but even Admiralty corridors? But that is the kind of thing which - even if it occurred - would probably not leave evidence. What we can observe, apart, of course, from their letters to W.H. Smith, is that in the 1850s Swainson and Kempe had been private secretaries to the Permanent and Parliamentary Secretaries, Thomas Phinn and Ralph Bernal Osborne. The two latter, we know from other sources, had clashes that led Phinn to resign and return to the greater tranquility of the legal profession.¹⁷ How easy it would have been for the friction between the two chiefs to have communicated itself to their juniors, and lasted long after both the former had retired. Natural feelings of loyalty might even be expected to have that result.

One might well have cool relations with a particular colleague, but not antagonise others in the office as well. The point about Swainson, though, is that he quite clearly did antagonise others. Underlining someone's use of the first person is in itself a pretty extreme action to take in a bureaucracy, and suggests serious annoyance. That is a case, though, where it was probably senior men who were taking offence. From the evidence of the other names on the docket concerned, and the look of the handwriting, one should point to either the Medical Director-General or the Controller of the Navy, both - at that time - Principal Officers of the Navy, thus satisfactorily senior to a Principal Clerk; they were senior enough not only to think themselves entitled to comment, but also to feel some objection to a clerk pushing himself into their domains. But what was the attitude to Swainson among his juniors? Here, too, we can reasonably infer reservations - even actual disgruntlement.

By his own admission in that letter to W.H. Smith, Swainson had long been pushing the cause of administrative reform, and had been drawing up

papers on the subject, sending copies of one scheme to both Smith and Lingen. It is all too likely that some of his colleagues saw copies, too, or even if they did not, Swainson - sure of his opinion - must have given them details, and likely looked for support. But what were the details? As Swainson told Smith, he had anticipated the schemes of the 1878 and 1879 committees, which means not just the better grading of work, but also another crucial point: the combination of higher pay with reduction of numbers of staff. This kind of proposal was explosive to bureaucrats. Some in the Secretariat doubtless applauded the principle, and perhaps the opportunity it offered themselves, but the overall reaction would have been at best mixed. Surely it would have led to deep fears about tenure of office among the many who, in any bureaucracy, are just trying 'to jog along'. For likely reactions - to the proposer as well as to the plan - we can turn to Balzac's dramatic rendition of exactly such a case, in *Les Employés* (1836, later version 1844). In that novel, his hero, Roubourdin, proposes to the Minister that posts be cut greatly, and salaries raised in line to the men remaining. Unfortunately, a copy of the scheme is abstracted, the news speeds around the office, leading to dissent, a cruel caricature passing from hand to hand, and Roubourdin's resignation. Again, of course, we cite a literary source, but one that seems psychologically true to the case at hand - not just in facing us with a likely array of the types who people an office, but also in showing that a brave bureaucratic reformer can expect some hostility. Incidentally, it also shows that Swainson was by no means early in the field with his proposals.

For a more concrete example of how Swainson could disturb the accustomed tenor of office life, we can return to 1880 and the case of Mr Dacres. One recalls that Swainson argued it would be 'disastrous' to retain such a man in the higher division. The word is a very strong one, and suggests not just zeal but a touch of intolerance. One implication is that Mr Swainson was a severe Assistant Secretary. What is more significant, though, is that the Dacres case also shows Swainson behaving differently from his immediate colleagues. It will be remembered that there were eventually two clerks with poor records and slated for dismissal. Two heads of branches - like Swainson, Principal Clerks - thought well enough of the two proposed ejectees to offer to take them in to their own branches

and give them a chance at redemption. The head of the Naval Branch took Dacres. The head of 'M' - that is, MacGregor - took the other. Here was a contrast with Swainson, here was another model of administration. It is not difficult to see which one was more acceptable to the community of clerks, to that intangible thing called 'the sense of the office'. One understands why Northbrook thought that - from the opinions entertained of MacGregor in the office - he would manage it well.

There is a large amount of supporting evidence to the idea that Swainson was a relatively severe disciplinarian. In minute after minute, we find him taking the stricter line. Moral transgressions in particular aroused him. Sailors who would not remit money to their dependants, a dockyard writer who - to the applause of the onlookers - was acquitted at Portsmouth of corrupt practice, the obscene graffiti in the lavatory of the Accountant-General's department, all of these upset him gravely. He would press his objections, often only to have his colleagues, or the Lords, prefer quietly to smooth over difficulties. It is likely he did not quite understand their reactions, for he appears to have lacked a certain empathy. He took one clerk to task for repeated delay, and was not at all mollified by the man's superior referring to 'prolonged domestic affliction'. He proposed disciplinary action; instead, MacGregor dealt with the matter through a private interview. As it happens, we do come across a subordinate with whom he sympathised, but that was the librarian, G.F. Hooper, a hard-working compiler of catalogues and references, fascinated with detail, and greatly concerned about accuracy: in short, he was rather like Swainson himself, as is proven by reference to much of the latter's ordinary work, in particular his punctilious - on occasion pettifogging - revision of the naval regulations in the early 1880s.¹⁸

When one considers what all this implies about the man, not forgetting his pronounced egotism, it might well be suspected not simply that Swainson was a somewhat uncomfortable colleague, but that he suffered to some degree from Asperger's Syndrome. That anyway seems entirely possible given the condition is likely genetic in nature, and Swainson's father was obsessive and difficult.¹⁹ It is also interesting to keep the diagnosis in mind when looking at the three surviving photographs, of which one is offered here, dating from the early

1860s. Most subjects usually looked either at the camera, or only slightly to one side. In all of the extant portraits, though, Swainson looks determinedly away. This refusal to engage the onlooker can be read as suggesting a certain lack of sociability.²⁰

Yet we do not need to diagnose Asperger's in order to show the man could be difficult and thus unpopular in the office. There is one incident which might be seen to offer pretty conclusive evidence. We have suggested that Swainson could have caused disgruntlement in some quarters. Nevertheless, that has not prepared us to think he might have been the intended victim of a murderous bomb - still, he clearly was.

III

Upon hearing a very loud bang on Thursday morning, 23 April 1885, some listeners in Whitehall thought that the Army had fired a gun in honour of a royal birthday. Others feared that the Fenians - as they had been doing for the past two years and more - had perpetrated a London dynamite outrage. More accurate information is found in the diary of one of the leading Treasury clerks, E.W. Hamilton - incidentally, the secretary to the 1879 committee into the Admiralty. He wrote that at a few minutes before 11 there had been 'a tremendous row'. At first, he was one of those who assumed there had been a birthday gun, but 'it turned out to be an explosion at the Admiralty which has severely injured Swainson'.²¹

Admiralty sources tell us that Swainson was found lying in his office in a litter of books and bookshelves; he was unconscious, with wounds to his head. He was sent to Hospital, and recovered consciousness that evening. The visible wounds began to heal, but it gradually became clear there were serious internal injuries. A few weeks stay in Freiburg in Baden gave the patient the perfect quiet he wanted, but did not restore him. At the end of July, after his return, he was seen by the Medical Director-General of the Navy, who reported a grim series of symptoms. Swainson had difficulty in stooping, could not read for more than a few minutes without headache and confusion, and his memory was much impaired. It

seemed unlikely he would ever be fit to return to work. In mid-August he wrote to apply for retirement, suggesting either a pension equivalent to his full pay and allowances - £1,200 p.a. - or the £800 pension he would have earned after 40 years service (six more than he had actually served), plus a special bonus of £5,000 to compensate him for his injuries. He said he would prefer the latter, since he could thus make better provision for his large family (he had six daughters and two sons) were he to die in a few years.²²

The Treasury were not happy about granting both pension and gratuity, but did award a special pension of £1,000 p.a.; liberal, by their usual standards.²³ They even agreed to pay £150 to cover extra doctors' bills and the expenses of the few weeks in Germany. Once the pension was awarded, Swainson promptly moved back to Germany. For most of the rest of his life, he lived on the Continent, latterly favouring Florence. From 1899 to 1906, the departmental pension books show him with only one address - the Vieusseux Library, via de' Vecchietti. This was more than a *poste restante* address. The library not only contained the latest books and journals in English, but was at a centre of expatriate life, clearly indicated by the large 'Albion Tea Rooms' on the ground floor in the same block.²⁴ There was, of course, also the attraction of the relatively low Continental cost of living. Swainson lived far longer than he at first feared he might, so - lacking the lump sum he requested - his long residence abroad gave him a chance to help his children. In the end, though, the years added up. His wife died in Paris in 1907, and Swainson moved back to live in London again, accompanied by one or two unmarried daughters. In around 1911 the symptoms of senile dementia became gradually more obvious, and he was certified on 3 December 1912, being sent to Holloway Asylum, the palatial hospital founded by Thomas Holloway at Egham, Surrey, in the 1880s. Death came - from bronchopneumonia - on 1 November 1913.²⁵

Though Swainson survived the explosion, therefore, the severe, busy, pressing Assistant Secretary had been destroyed. And this, it is clear, was not the result of accident. The explosion did not come from a gas leakage; nor was it the result of carelessness with some kind of naval munition kept, for

whatever reason, in the room. A charge of gunpowder had been set off there, one that was intended to kill, and to kill Swainson. Let us take those last two statements in turn. First, the charge was potentially highly lethal: it was no silly office prank with crackers. It comprised twelve pounds of gunpowder packed into a gallon cast-iron stockpot - in short, it was a powerful bomb - and this had been placed on top of a cupboard right by Swainson's desk. The room was a double one, with two windows, some eighteen feet by twenty, but not large given the device in question. If the explosive shock hadn't proved deadly, the shrapnel from the iron pot ought to have done, and it certainly peppered the walls and ceiling.²⁶

Lethal in intent, therefore, but personal to Swainson? Might the attack not have been simply another of those which the Fenians had been making for some time against public buildings, where casualties were merely an accidental by-product? But the Admiralty case was not similar. First of all, the explosive was different. The Fenian London outrages from 1882-1885 used either dynamite or special powder ('Atlas Powder A') manufactured in the U.S.A. - not the gunpowder of the Admiralty bomb. Furthermore, the *modus operandi* was quite different. The Fenians were opportunity attackers: they slipped explosives into cavities outside public buildings, or left them in public areas inside (for instance, the 'infernal machine' left in Westminster Hall in January 1885); or in one case, just dropped a bomb outside the window of an underground train.²⁷ The Admiralty attack, though with another 'infernal machine', showed much more careful planning and a more specific aim. The bomb was not slipped into the room by someone standing outside a window; it was taken into the room and placed on a cupboard. To do that through one of Swainson's office windows would not have been an easy task, above all when carrying a heavy and unwieldy bomb. It was not just a matter of clambering through a window, assuming one had been left open; first you had to get to the Admiralty building itself, which would have meant getting over a ten-foot wall (again with bomb in hand). Nor was there easy ingress to the office through the inside of the building, at least for a stranger. There was a door for senior clerks and officials, but that opened to a special key, so anyone else would have had to enter by one of the two other doors. Before 10 a.m., these were

generally closed, and there were messengers, clerks, and regular police patrols moving around. Subsequently, visitors were superintended, and they were directed to the ground floor waiting room until called. A stranger might be allowed in, but would be noticed, by the Admiralty attendants and also by anyone else in the waiting room. Visitors to the Admiralty were mostly of a particular type - naval officers, whether in uniform or out: that is, they were men who dressed and behaved in such and such a way, who knew such and such things, who wanted such and such people. There would be some civilians - for instance, politicians to see the Parliamentary Secretary or the First Lord, and contractors, engineers, and manufacturers to see heads of departments; or relatives of clerks working in the building, perhaps just calling in to leave luncheon baskets. Yet even the civilians would likely be known, or would know whom they wanted and ask to see them. Visitors who were not known, or who showed uncertainty, would invite inquiry, and be remembered. A complete stranger was not likely to evade attention if he came blundering in through the Admiralty front gates, carrying a heavy parcel.

The Fenians were not the only possible outside suspects. April 1885 saw the high-point of a crisis with Russia, and war seemed imminent. Might the Russians have planned to incapacitate the Admiralty through setting a bomb? Shades of Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* and Mr Verloc! Such a paranoid interpretation is encouraged by the knowledge that, as Assistant Secretary, Swainson was in charge of the office secret service money.²⁸ Nevertheless, it still sounds highly unlikely: anyone trying to sabotage war preparations would surely have preferred a naval lord as victim. However, and this applies whether we consider agents or Fenians, it is the logistical difficulties that remain uppermost: how, in the circumstances, could complete strangers have planted the bomb and evaded detection subsequently? It might have been done, of course; but extreme possibilities distract us from the obvious probability. The bomber almost certainly had some personal acquaintanceship with the Admiralty. And if the bombing was an 'inside job' of some form, then Swainson must have been the intended target. That certainly was what the Home Office team under their chief explosives expert,

Colonel V.D. Majendie, thought: they concluded the bomb was ‘the outcome of private spite’.²⁹

Suspicion turns first to the clerks within the Secretariat. One might look to an over-chastised junior. Or to immediate subordinates who saw Swainson as an obstacle to their own advancement. What, for instance, of Richard Awdry, head of the Secretariat Civil Branch, who was to succeed Swainson as Assistant Secretary? Or C.I Thomas, second in Swainson’s own Legal Branch, who eventually rose to be MacGregor’s successor? Yet we know nothing whatsoever to impeach the probity of those two men. There is in any case a general, if cynical, objection: gunpowder was scarcely the weapon of choice of the civil servant, even if it was then available commercially with remarkable freedom.³⁰ The traditional bureaucratic means of dealing with an enemy was to wait for him to fall into the marmalade through his own error, and then fail to help.

Without entirely dismissing the disgruntled subordinate, we should consider what is, psychologically speaking, a more likely suspect - some officer or another, with plausible means of entry to the Admiralty, professional habits of daring and action, and a sense that his honour had been impugned. We find various cases in the archives of officers who were dismissed the service because of accusations of serious error or crime, such as losing a ship, or sleight of hand over money, or sexual impropriety. Some, we know, tried to appeal against the decision, and called at the Admiralty, in which case they would probably have been sent to see the man who was both Assistant Secretary and head of the Legal Branch. From that interview, as we can imagine, much else might have flowed.

Swainson would have made a good scapegoat and object of revenge. First, he was a civil servant, and there have long been naval officers willing to blame their difficulties on Admiralty civilian officials. Furthermore, Swainson may well have given the wrong impression to an aggrieved officer during any interview. Of course, he was not responsible for deciding about serious cases involving officers in the Navy. Such affairs - above all those concerning matters of personal honour - would be discussed by the Board, in particular the Naval Lords, and the final decisions made by them. But that might not have been at all clear to

the visitor. Swainson - in his confidence, his grasp of the issues involved, and perhaps above all in his willingness to adopt firm opinions and, one recalls, to use the first person - might well have given the impression to the caller that it was he, Swainson, who was truly responsible for what had been decided. Any lack of empathy, or avoidance of eye-contact, would have compounded the problem. With the scenario suggested above we have a potent mixture of elements - a military training, a blasted reputation, a desperate desire for revenge, and an obvious and immediate man to blame - sufficient explanation, one might think, for the murderous violence and risk of the crime that was committed.

One may even suggest how the bombing could have been done. Swainson, we know, was absent from the office on leave in early 1885 for about three weeks in all,³¹ and - judging from the absence of surviving minutes from 18 to 22 April, though this is dangerous negative evidence - part of this period was made up by a few days absence immediately before the day of the explosion. We may thus suppose our bomber, discovering his target would be away for a few days, makes some excuse to visit the Admiralty, and is sent to the ground-floor waiting room, which - as an old hand would know - was only just over the corridor from Swainson's office. He slips over to the empty room, and would have needed only a few minutes to set up a bomb with the then equivalent of a trembler fuze - a bottle of acid set so a small movement could tip it over another chemical, producing heat and then the explosion of the gunpowder.³² Swainson, returning a day or so later, enters his office, and notices the strange object. He moves the pot a little, thus upsetting the acid. Only because he then moves away, before the heat builds to critical level, does he escape death.

This is pure hypothesis, of course, and it is offered simply to suggest how the deed might have been accomplished. However, one must confess it is not entirely likely. Again, the logistics get in the way. The criminal might have got away with it, but would have been lucky to do so - lucky, perhaps above all, in any possible witness not recalling an officer carrying a curious large parcel into the building. Also, the *Times'* report of 24 April said two or three small brass wheels and a dial, apparently from a cheap clock, were found in the shattered office. That

might suggest a clockwork timer and fuzing device, but these tended to be erratic and unreliable, and it was best to ready them at most only a few hours before detonation. To assume one in our case is to imply a greater possibility of error, and to make the time factor even more critical for the criminal, so much so that one wonders whether there might be a reasonable alternative explanation, without going back to the possibility of a disgruntled subordinate.

There is one - attempted suicide. With this, the logistical difficulties collapse - Swainson had a key that gave him access to his office at any time. But what on earth leads one to a superficially ludicrous suggestion? The first answer is the man's own relations in New Zealand . It was apparently their opinion that Edwin had tried to blow himself up, but had botched the job.³³ This is not to be dismissed for reasons of distance. One of Edwin's nephews was in England by 1885; he kept in touch with his uncle, and wrote regularly back to New Zealand . Another resident was Edwin's brother Henry, who had become a naval officer, and by now was the Superintendent of Compasses at Portsmouth.³⁴ He and Edwin met periodically, and Henry was quick to come up to London after the explosion.

Furthermore, we can see that Edwin would have had some motives. Frustrated ambition was one. It seems pointed that the bomb exploded almost exactly a year after MacGregor had been appointed Secretary. It is relevant to note that the frustration of a fixed aim is likely to be particularly galling to those with Asperger's, and can trigger attempts at suicide. (Though it had better be emphasised our diagnosis of the syndrome is highly speculative.) Furthermore, Swainson had financial problems. He seems to have lost much of his money by 1868: his eldest brother William joshed him in a letter that October for having suffered through bank failure. The date suggests to one the widespread financial collapse brought about when the broking house of Overend and Gurney fell in 1866. Whatever the cause, Swainson subsequently felt somewhat pressed for cash. We see him using the Admiralty frank on his private letters to his Antipodean family - though what he did had long been regarded as a legitimate perk of office by government employees, so perhaps we should not read too much into it. More indicative, he was keen to receive his share of his father's inheritance in ready

money, and did not wish to leave it in land to accumulate in value.³⁵ Any financial problems would have been compounded by the early 1880s. Being Assistant Secretary encouraged a fitting ostentation in life, and the Swainsons had rented a fine but expensive house by Tavistock Square . And, since Swainson had married in 1860, his numerous children were now growing into teenagers and young adults, when their need for money would have been at its greatest. The combination of the different factors may have meant that by 1885 Swainson felt overcome by events, and saw only one route to take. He might have rationalised that he would not be leaving his widow quite destitute. At this time, civil service widows did not receive pensions, but the Admiralty was traditionally generous - as Swainson would have known well from his duties - to the widows of officers who had died in action; a good precedent, he may have felt, for a widow bereaved by what would surely be seen as a Fenian bomb.

Still, whatever motives one might discern, immolation by gunpowder seems a rather extreme method to choose. Yet we know some did so. For instance, from 1881-5 there were three recorded attempts at suicide through filling the mouth with gunpowder and setting a match.³⁶ Admittedly, the men concerned were poor and tragically ignorant. Swainson was a civil servant, and it has been suggested already that gunpowder was not the weapon of choice of such people. But - as it is to be hoped has been shown - Swainson was scarcely a typical civil servant. Perhaps his family was right about the bomb. And one other piece of evidence should be mentioned. At Holloway Asylum, Swainson was a pathetic remnant of the man he had been. He could not speak consequentially, he did not recognise his surroundings, he did not recognise people, he was not capable of doing anything useful to occupy his time. He was not violent - though with one exception. He had developed the habit, before committal, of intentionally setting fire to the curtains - 'to curtains, etc.' as the casebook somewhat chillingly records. The doctors suggested that he likely had suffered attacks before 1911.³⁷ Perhaps he had. One need not belabour the point that flame and explosives can be allied interests.

IV

Of course, 'allied' is ambiguous. Any causal link between the bomb and the pyromania might run in either direction. The evidence is scarcely conclusive on Swainson's mental condition, perhaps above all in that we do not know how badly the explosion damaged his brain. (There was, one should note, no autopsy; the death was not suspicious, quite the reverse.) Not, though, that we need conclusive proof. Certainly, no attempt is being made here to ascribe final blame for the Admiralty explosion. Our aim has been different: to describe an exceptional individual and, through him, the Admiralty Office of the time. Swainson qualifies as exceptional if he set the bomb: he qualifies equally if he was the one someone tried to bomb - a probably unique distinction in the Victorian Admiralty. Whichever the role ascribed, it has to be seen as a consequence of the type of administrator, and type of reformer he was. And that is where the significance really lies. For Swainson's attempts to bring greater efficiency to the naval administration demonstrate the largely unsupported and vulnerable individual in action. For a contrast we can look to his successor, Awdry. In 1887 he testified before a Royal Commission into the civil establishments of the departments of state, and showed some striking ambitions, but largely different ones from Swainson's. There were certainly some similarities. Notably, Awdry pressed the merit principle, wishing to make civil servants' salary increments depend upon proven efficiency. However, the cause he espoused was less individualistic than Swainson's. He urged that the Secretariat be placed in the same relationship to the other Admiralty departments as the Treasury's to the rest of the departments of state. Furthermore (and here he showed a foresight that MacGregor, who also gave evidence to the Commission, did not display), he proposed it should be the Secretariat, and not the department of the Accountant-General, which should supervise Admiralty expenditure, and thus ensure consistency in what we should now call financial policy.³⁸ In short, Awdry not just sketched out the path that the Secretariat was later to take, he also tried to foster a particular accumulation of authority - but one for the entire department, rather than a single member of it. Here was not another lone wolf, but a bureaucratic clan chief.

This did not imply the individual Admiralty civil servant would never be a decision-maker, nor help to shape policy. The institution of the Higher Division favoured greater personal initiative, as did the usual practice of admitting only University graduates to its ranks. Furthermore, the Treasury - and this is suggested by Lingen's questions at the Commission to which Awdry and MacGregor testified - wished to encourage senior officials in Whitehall to take greater responsibility. And we see, in the generation that succeeded Awdry's, some remarkably able and confident men taking over the higher echelons of the Secretariat. But they knew how to be discreet and decorous in the office. They certainly could express strong opinions in private, but realised that to do so publicly could be highly counter-productive. They knew that the way to convince the politicians was not to write aggressive minutes, but to write ones that marshaled evidence and logic so convincingly and (a key word, in its proper sense of course) disinterestedly, that no other conclusion was possible than the one that had been laid down like masonry between the lines. Swainson, on the other hand, could never help interposing his person. He ranks, therefore, as a transitional figure; he lay between the mid-nineteenth century generation of Admiralty civil servants who rarely rose above being rote administrators, and the 'statesmen in disguise' who ultimately succeeded him. He was a reformer, and in his way a bold one, but Admiralty reconstruction - albeit in more than one sense - had to continue after his departure from office.

NOTES

1. Undated, but presumably 29 Oct. 1884, like the previous one: docket 31/12/84, P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], (Kew), ADM 1/6746.
2. 24 Dec. 1878, docket 17 Dec., P.R.O. ADM 1/6462. For surveys of the Admiralty and Admiralty Secretariat, see N.A.M. Rodger, *The Admiralty* (Terence Dalton, Lavenham, Suffolk, 1979), and Paul Smith, 'Ruling the Waves:

Government, the Service and the Cost of Naval Supremacy, 1885-1914', in Smith (ed.), *Government and the Armed Forces in Britain 1856-1990* (The Hambledon Press, London, 1996), pp.21-52. See too J.C. Sainty's essential *Admiralty Officials 1660-1870* (Athlone Press, London, 1975).

3. See Sheila Natusch, *William Swainson of Fern Grove* (Nestegg Press, Wellington, N.Z., 1998); Geoffrey M. Swainson, *William Swainson F.R.S., F.L.S., Naturalist and Artist. Diaries 1808-1818: Sicily, Malta, Greece, Italy & Brazil.* (Palmerston North, N.Z., 1989); and *William Swainson F.R.S., F.L.S., Naturalist and Artist. Family Letters & Diaries 1809-1855. Final Destiny in New Zealand*, (Palmerston North, N.Z., 1992.) E.N. Swainson's middle name appears either as 'Newcombe' or 'Newcome': the latter appears to have become the usual form.

4. P.R.O. PROB 11/2038. Vol. no. 10, quire nos 451-500. 5 July 1846, c.p.396.

5. Three reports of the Playfair Civil Service Inquiry Commission, P[arliamentary] P[apers] 1875 XXIII.

6. Docket 9 Aug. 1878, P.R.O. ADM 1/6462.

7. Docket 25 Mar. 1878, P.R.O. ADM 1/6461.

8. Docket 27 Nov. 1879, sub-docket 15 Mar. 1880, P.R.O. ADM 1/6497.

9. Minute of First Lord, 8 Dec. 1879, docket 27 Nov. 1879, *ibid.* For clerks' salary scales, see the introduction to Sainty, *Admiralty Officials*.

10. 25 Nov. 1879, marked Confidential, PS6/490: Hambledon Papers, W.H. Smith Archive, Swindon.

11. 25 Nov. 1879, marked Confidential, PS6/495: Hambledon Papers.
12. 27 Nov. 1879, marked Private, PS6/492: Hambledon Papers.
13. Kempe to Smith, 30 April 1880, PS6 611, Reply of 2 May, PS6 612: Hambledon Papers. Pension Book, P.R.O. PMG/24/ 38.
14. Docket 31 Mar. 1884, ADM 1/6741.
15. 22 Mar. 1884, marked Private, Gladstone Papers, B[ritish] L[ibrary] Additional Ms. 44267, fos 52-5. Hamilton had been knighted in Jan. 1884.
16. J.R.H. Weaver (ed.), *DNB* , 1922-30 (O.U.P., 1937).
17. C.I. Hamilton (ed.) 'Selections from the Phinn Committee of Inquiry....,' in N.A.M. Rodger (ed.), *The Naval Miscellany* vol. 5, (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1984, for the Navy Records Society), p.374.
18. Docket '1883', ADM 1/6746; docket 28 Feb. 1884, ADM 1/6740; docket 3 Dec. 1884, ADM 1/6739; docket 28 Oct. 1884, ADM 1/6744; docket 13 June 1884, ADM 1/6743. He did show compassion to those outside the office: the minute referred to in note 2, for instance, was attempting to get better treatment for dockyard painters liable to suffer from lead poisoning.
19. On Asperger's syndrome I acknowledge with great thanks the expert advice of Dr. Sarah Smith. For characteristics, see L. Wing, 'Asperger syndrome: a clinical account', *Psychological Medicine*, 11, 1981, pp. 115-129, updated in web version, 2001.
20. The photograph of Swainson comes from the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington , New Zealand , reference no. 28463 1/2. Its reproduction here is owing

to the kind permission of the Library. The Turnbull also has one other Swainson photograph, showing the subject on his wedding day, ref. 28462 1/2. The third image can be found in Natusch, *William Swainson*, p.139.

21. Dudley W.R. Bahlman (ed.), *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton 1880-1886*, (2 vols, O.U.P., 1972.) Vol 2, 1883-5, p.844. See also the report in *The Times* of Friday 24 April, p.8.

22. Docket 29 Sept. 1885, ADM 1/6782. On costs and middle class standards of living, at least for a somewhat earlier period, see H.M. Boot, 'Real Incomes of the British Middle class, 1760-1850: the experience of clerks at the East India Company', *Economic History Review*, LII , 4 (1999), pp. 638-668.

23. Treasury to Admiralty, 22 (twice) and 29 Sept., 1885, P.R.O. T21/35, pp.393ff.

24. For British shopping in the 1890s around the nearby via de' Tornabuoni, see Kinta Beevor, *A Tuscan Childhood* (Viking, London, 1993), pp. 149f.

25. Pension books, P.R.O. PMG/24/28, 32, 34, 36, 40, 61, and 62. Notice of Death, dated 9 Dec. 1913, Holloway Asylum Casebook, Surrey Historical Centre, Woking , 3473/3/22, interleaved pp.353-4. I wish to thank the depositing authority for the Asylum records, the Surrey and Borders Partnership, for their courtesy in allowing me to see this material. I must also thank the staff of the Surrey Historical Centre for their great efficiency and kindness in this connexion.

26. *Tenth Annual Report of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Explosives... 1885*, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1886), P.R.O. LAB 59/2, p.59. I owe this reference to the kindness of Ian Jones. The figures for the size of the pot and gunpowder charge come from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 8 May 1885, p. 7, citing Col. Majendie's official report.

27. On Fenian attacks in 1883-4 see P.P. 1883 XIX and 1884 XVII.

28. Office minute, 'Position and Powers of the Assistant Secretary', 2 Mar. 1880, docket same date, P.R.O. ADM 1/6539.

29. *Tenth Annual Report of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Explosives... 1885*, p.59.

30. Gunpowder was not to be sold on a public highway or public place, to a child apparently under 13, or in a container holding over 100lb. Explosive Substances Act, 38 Vict. ch. 17, clause 30.

31. This detail, as with others concerning Swainson's service and promotion, comes from the return in docket 29 Sept. 1885, ADM 1/6782.

32. See the *Eighth Annual Report of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Explosives*, pp.49f: P.R.O. LAB 59/2.

33. Letter to author from Sheila Natusch. I should like to acknowledge Mrs Natusch's kind and generous help in my researches on the Swainsons.

34. William Swainson (junior) to E.N. Swainson, 3 May and 12 June 1885, Alexander Turnbull Library, qMS-1962.

35. Letters from William (junior) to E.N. Swainson, 4 Oct. 1868, 5 Sept. 1870, 27 June 1872. See also 4 Oct. 1868. Turnbull qMS-1962. Edwin's will (21 Jan. 1911) tells us little more than that he had turned over his estate to his wife and children in 1885, so we lack financial details. High Holborn Probate Office registers.

36. *Tenth Annual Report of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Explosives... 1885*, p.67.

37. Holloway Asylum Casebook, Surrey Historical Centre, 3473/3/22, pp. 351-4.

38. P.P. 1887 XIX, pp. 355-68.



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