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In the Shadow of Briggs: A New Perspective on British Naval Administration and W. T. Stead's 1884 "Truth about the Navy" Campaign

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It is a paradoxical adage in law enforcement, that, notwithstanding its immediacy and apparent credibility, eyewitness accounts are generally the least reliable source of evidence in criminal investigations. The same, regrettably, holds for many first-hand historical accounts. Few, if any about the modern Royal Navy, serve better to illustrate this point than John Henry Briggs' *Naval Administrations 1827–92*.

Briggs' credentials to write on the subject were certainly impeccable. He spent almost 45 years at the Admiralty, of which more than 35 were served in close contact with the Board itself, first as Deputy Reader, then Reader, and finally as Chief Clerk. As he boasted in his volume's introduction, "During my tenure of office I had the honour of serving with fifteen First Lords and upwards of fifty Admirals" adding that his successive positions "placed me in daily personal communication with the members of the Board and secretaries; and, as all despatches passed through my hands, I was cognizant of all that was taking place in the department."¹ An account by one so well placed should be an immense boon to anyone interested in the course of Victorian naval policy and the workings of Admiralty administration.

Alas, the salient qualities of his book are its gossipy tone and myriad factual errors, both small and large. It is a profoundly, frustratingly unreliable source, as has long been recognized by historians. Yet despite this recognition, Briggs' take on many subjects remains fundamentally unchallenged. A case in point—the one on which I am focusing here—is his account of the circumstances surrounding the "Truth about the Navy" campaign of journalist W. T. Stead in the *Pall Mall Gazette* during the latter months of 1884.

Stead painted a bleak picture of the Senior Service's state, claiming that it lacked both the *materiel* and the manpower to defend either the Home Islands or the Empire. Briggs' own synopsis of Stead's message neatly captures its alarmism:

The naval expenditure of other powers has increased 40%. . . . So far from being able to demonstrate our "irresistible superiority" in armour, guns, and speed to any probable combination of fleets, we are just a little ahead of France in ships, behind her in guns and the age of our ships. . . . A hostile cruise could, with almost entire impunity, destroy to-morrow the coaling stations of Hong-Kong,

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

Singapore, Bombay, the Cape, Ascension, St. Helena, Mauritius, King George's Sound [Western Australia], Fiji, and Vancouver's Island, which are virtually unprotected. . . . He have not sufficient men to man our fleet when war is declared. . . .²

According to Briggs, blame for this alleged state of affairs rested on many shoulders, but especially those of First Lord of the Admiralty, Thomas George Baring, 1st Earl of Northbrook, who, despite extensive previous experience with naval administration³, was a disastrous choice for the office:

. . . Lord Northbrook was a politician, and, what is more, a very strong party man. From the date of his entering into public life he imbibed the extreme views advocated by his [Liberal] party in regard to economy and retrenchment; he was at all time disinclined to incur any expense which he thought might be inconvenient or embarrassing to the Ministry, and was consequently far more solicitous to keep down the estimates than to add to the strength of the navy.⁴

Briggs claimed "the state of the navy had for some years past excited well-grounded apprehensions amongst those who had access to information that could be depended upon. . . ." "It was perfectly notorious that France, Italy, Germany, and Russia had been directing greatly increased attention to the state and augmentation of their respective navies, and consequently our relative position as a naval power, compared with bygone days, had materially altered and greatly diminished in strength." The outcome of this state of affairs was predictable. Stead's campaign succeeded in arousing public opinion and the government was forced to introduce a large supplementary estimate for increased shipbuilding.

This account, in turn, entered the canon unchallenged as received wisdom. Oscar Parkes, for instance, borrowed Briggs' words as well as his ideas: "Northbrook was a politician and a very strong party one at that. Having from early days imbibed the extreme views of economy and retrenchment associated with Liberalism, he was always more solicitous to keep down the Estimates than to incur any expenses which he thought might be embarrassing to the Ministry."⁵ Arthur Marder claims that so detached was Northbrook from naval administration that he "apparently . . . did not read details of the *Pall Mall* scare until on his way back to England" from a colonial trouble-shooting mission to Egypt.⁶ Similarly, Nicholas Rodger states that Northbrook was "uninterested" in the Navy and "so long as the Estimates were kept down," he was "content to leave the running of the Navy to those, like [First Naval Lord Astley Cooper] Key who enjoyed it."⁷ Like Briggs, subsequent commentators have pointed to ambitious overseas shipbuilding programs during the late 1870s and early 1880s, programs which they claim Admiralty resolutely ignored. Northbrook's Board, Parkes maintained, "inherited control of a Navy not even superior to that of France either in battleships or cruisers," while the

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

French were in the midst of a construction program which vastly exceeded that of Britain.⁸ Marder is only slightly less critical:

In 1884 England still possessed the largest navy in the world, but the situation was clearly full of danger. The French fleet was growing rapidly, and if, as had happened before, the English had to face alone a European coalition at sea, the situation would be desperate. The Italians and Russians were creating big fleets, and the new German Empire was already showing naval ambitions. A combination of Germany and France alone [scarcely a likelihood] would outnumber the English in first-class ships.⁹

Rodger is equally blunt: “. . . the country and empire were defended less by expensive armaments than by the unquestioned, though largely unjustified assumption . . . that it was adequately defended. The long era of peace in the middle years of Queen Victoria’s reign was to a great extent buttressed by a gigantic deception. . . .”

Well, there was a certainly gigantic deception at work during the mid-Victorian era, but it was not that claimed by Rodger. Instead, it was a deception perpetrated by Briggs and Stead, and accepted uncritically by virtually every writer on the subject since the 1880s. Briggs’ account can be disputed on almost every substantive point, yet nobody seems to have examined the primary source material which would enable them to do so.

True, the French *were* engaged in an ambitious program of naval reconstruction, underway since 1872, but not a matter of priority in the immediate wake of the Franco-German War. Between 1875 and 1880 they laid down thirteen sea-going battleships or station battleships and another four coast defense/assault vessels, more than doubling the total number—seven—begun by Britain during those years. By 1877 Controller William Houston Stewart warned ominously that the French “are rapidly going ahead of us, and unless it is decided to lay down 12 Armoured Battle Ships to be completed by the end of 1881, that year will find the Navy of France decidedly superior to that of Great Britain in ships and guns.”¹⁰ This sentiment was echoed by Second Naval Lord Arthur Hood, who calculated the relative numbers of ironclads built and building at fifty-one for Britain to fifty-five for France, and First Naval Lord George Wellesley who warned that France’s building program would “give her a very considerable superiority” “unless steps are taken in this country to keep pace with her.”¹¹ To these alarming accounts, however, Conservative First Lord W. H. Smith merely noted “[a] very interesting paper.”¹² The Board neither increased the pace of construction on existing ships nor authorized new ones in the wake of this exchange of views.

Contra Briggs’ allegation, however, the Liberal Ministry, which entered office in early 1880 with Northbrook as First Lord, was acutely aware of the narrowing numerical gap between the British and French ironclad fleets. A June 1880 report submitted by the naval

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

attaché in Paris, Captain Rice, informed the Board that the French Ministry of Marine had “definitely decided to build four more [battleships] of 10,300 tons load displacement” in addition to the nine battleships, two coast defense ships, and four cruising or “station” battleships begun since 1875.¹³ This news prompted several Board members, among them Parliamentary Secretary George John Shaw Lefevre, to produce comparative assessments of the two battle fleets. Shaw Lefevre noted that the previous Board had access to earlier assessments rendered by Barnaby and Houston Stewart, but had failed to alter

their policy or . . . make any special exertions to increase the armour clad fleet. On the contrary the estimates for 1880-81 prepared by the late Board provided for a smaller amount of tonnage of ironclad building than in any of the past 12 years.

Shaw-Lefevre refused to accept the alarmism of Houston Stewart uncritically, however, pointing instead to the views of U.S. Navy Engineer-in-Chief James W. King, whose recently published work on Europe’s navies estimated the British fleet to be “superior to that of France by about 60 [percent].” He admitted, though, that King counted vessels in both navies that were far short of completion, prompting him to undertake his own calculations. These largely agreed with King as regards existing ships, but the Parliamentary Secretary then moved to the heart of the issue:

[t]here remains the fact that the French have a much larger number of vessels in course of construction, and that the actual tonnage of ironclads built in each of the last 2 years has been considerably in excess of what has been done by England in the same time.

He still refused to bow to the temptation of panic, though. Noting that the French had done little to keep up their fleet in the immediate wake of the Franco-German War—concentrating instead on army reform and reconstruction—they now faced the need not only to replace many obsolescent ironclads which dated back to the Second Empire, but to counter the emergence of Germany and Italy as naval powers, albeit powers of limited ambition. Yet, he concluded, if the French completed their stated naval construction goals while Britain failed to respond, “there cannot be a doubt that the strength of the French Fleet would by [1885] equal if not exceed our own, unless considerable additions be made to the latter in the interval.” And even if the French failed to meet their goals, if the British did not accelerate their own building programs, “the time must arrive when the two fleets will closely approximate.” Shaw Lefevre thus concluded his survey emphatically:

[i]t appears that it will not be safe to maintain for the next 5 years the rate of construction of iron clads of the last 6 years, namely 8000 tons a year . . . and that in order to maintain a reasonable superiority over the French fleet we must

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

considerably increase the construction of iron clads during the next few years, and so long as the French maintain their present rate of progress.

The Liberal administration clearly recognized what W. H. Smith and the Conservatives seem to have ignored.

What is more, they responded forcefully. Debates surrounding the types of ships most needed for the fleet and the best designs for them consumed much of 1880 and early 1881, but by March of the latter year the Board had authorized two armoured cruisers—*Warspite* and *Imperieuse*—to counter enemy commerce raiders and on 1 August 1881 Northbrook himself issued a directive calling for “Two *Collingwoods* [type battleships] to be laid down. . . .”¹⁴ Moreover, continuing concern over French shipbuilding prompted Northbrook and his colleagues to authorize an additional three *Collingwood*-class vessels in 1882.

Ironically, too, it was at precisely this point that French efforts began to appear distinctly less ominous, not that they had been all that ominous in the first place. As Shaw Lefevre’s highly capable successor George Otto Trevelyan noted to the House of Commons in 1882, the French shipbuilding program was “a temporary measure for the purpose of replacing an obsolete Fleet.”¹⁵ This assessment could be gainsaid only by wholesale disregard of easily available evidence. Trevelyan’s equally capable successor, future Prime Minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman provided specifics in response to a Conservative attack on Liberal naval policy the following year:

I believe the object of France is most reasonable and patriotic, and one which we can regard without any alarm. She finds that the great bulk of her Fleet is composed of wooden ships of short lives . . . and she wishes to substitute for them the more modern style of steel ships. . . .¹⁶

The need for an accelerated construction program was, as Campbell-Bannerman put it, the consequence of prior neglect: “[i]t is somewhat more than ten years ago since the people of France awoke to the fact that their naval force had not been kept up to the proper level.” “To make up for this neglect, the people of France resolved, for some years to come, to devote large sums of money to restoring their Fleet to what they believed to be its proper position.”¹⁷

Equally to the point, as Trevelyan stressed in 1882, “The whole of the extraordinary French Estimates for rebuilding their Fleet had hitherto been provided, not out of revenue, but as an increase to the National Debt.”¹⁸ Moreover, “it had been intended” in the French naval budget of 1882 “that the shipbuilding should as usual be paid for out of a loan, but the [Ways and Means] Committee had recommended that for this year and for all the future the shipbuilding should be met out of Revenue,” a sign that the

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

Parliamentary Secretary took to be “a strong confirmation that” with the completion of the rebuilding program the “object at which the French Admiralty had been aiming would have been accomplished, and . . . that they would carry it no further.” Hence, Trevelyan concluded, “it was not necessary for the safety of the country” to augment their own building program “unless the French Admiralty, having completed its programme of 1872 and replaced its obsolete ships, should go on building as fast as ever. . . .”¹⁹

In retrospect it is clear that Trevelyan and Campbell-Bannerman were correct. In 1885 Northbrook could note that despite the number of battleships laid down by his Board, “this number would have been insufficient if the French had continued the rate of building which they had been following during the previous five years. . . .”

but a change took place in the financial arrangements of the French Admiralty. They had supplemented their shipbuilding votes by borrowed money, but that system ceased in 1881, and their rate of expenditure, and what is still more important, their rate of progress, which we carefully watched, fell off considerably.²⁰

More than the rate of progress dropped off. In 1882 France had commenced two ironclads, another in 1883, and one in 1884. No further battleships were begun until the *Brennus* was laid down in 1889, and no other armoured ships were started save for two armoured cruisers, these, too, at the very end of the decade.²¹ As Theodore Ropp notes, “construction of the ships begun in 1880 was slowed by the financial crisis of 1882.”²²

The expansion of the French Navy [he continues] in the early 1880s, along with many other capital improvements, was financed by loans. When these dried up, the navy was forced to take a major cut in its budget, which fell from 217.2 million francs in 1883 to 171.6 million in 1885. As a result, the whole armoured shipbuilding program nearly ground to a halt.

Insofar as French ambitions posed any threat to British naval supremacy (which I doubt), that threat peaked in 1881. By 1884, the relative balance between the two fleets was much altered in Britain’s favor. It was most ironic that the Stead panic broke out after Britain’s position had taken a noticeable—one is tempted to say dramatic—turn for the better.

Nor was there hard evidence to support alarmist warnings about other powers’ growing naval ambitions. In the course of the 1880s, Germany began exactly one seagoing and one coast-defense ironclad, and Austria-Hungary began two ships of the former type.²³ Slightly more impressive was the Italian Navy, which began six sea-going ironclads during the decade, but the British laid down ten such vessels during the same period. Moreover, those six Italian ships, when finally complete (the last in 1895) gave the nation

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

a battlefleet of only ten modern vessels. In fact, aside from Britain, the only maritime nation which can reasonably be said to have carried out an extensive shipbuilding program during the 1880s was the one least often mentioned by contemporary navalists: Russia. Between 1880 and 1888, Russia laid down six first-class battleships, plus four armored cruisers, more capital ships, by a considerable margin, than were begun by France during the decade. Yet even with the completion of these ships the Russian navy was in little position to mount a serious maritime challenge to Britain, since at the beginning of the decade it possessed but a single sea-going ironclad of the first rank: the *Peter the Great*.

As for the naval expenditures of rival powers, it was true that Italian spending had jumped from about £1.4 million in 1868 to 2.3 million in 1884, but the latter was barely 20% of what Britain spent on its navy in 1884.²⁴ Likewise, the German Navy's budget in 1884 was considerably higher than it had been in the late 1860s for the simple reason that there had been no German Navy until 1871. In 1884, it received £2.45 million, but this was only 21.4% the amount the British navy was allotted. The United States Navy got 32.2% of the amount bestowed on Britain's fleet, and the impoverished Austro-Hungarian Navy received 8.2% of the funding its British counterpart. Russian naval funding was more substantial, but still less than half of that of Britain in 1884.²⁵

In sum, Stead succeeded in creating a public furor, not based on substantive evidence, but on scandal-mongering alarmism. This should come as no surprise; his business was to sell newspapers, and he followed the "Truth about the Navy" campaign with other sensationalistic exploits, including the purchase of an adolescent girl on the black market. That his, and Briggs', allegations about the state of the Navy were without foundation can be seen from the measured and distinctly unalarmed response by the most informed Admiralty insiders, Parliamentary Secretary Campbell-Bannerman and First Naval Lord Astley Cooper Key. The former wrote Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Childers on 2 October 1884:

It is the iron-clad Fleet that is generally most discussed in the House of Commons, but I do not think it is on this that my [naval] colleagues would spend . . . money if they had it. . . . [I]t may be that a period has come, or is coming, when owing to the definite program the French have been recently working up to, our margin of superiority may be for the moment less than it should be. When their programme is accomplished, we should, of course, by going on steadily year by year, recover our ground.²⁶

Even more emphatically, Cooper Key wrote to a colleague in December 1884:

We now have twenty-seven ironclads in commission. The French have eleven. We could commission thirteen more within a month. I cannot find

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

that the French have more than two ready and one of these has her boilers condemned (*Richelieu*). Many of our ships are of obsolete types—so are many of theirs. Moreover, being of wood theirs cannot last long. I should have no fear whatever of war with France and Russia now, so far as our Navy is concerned. . . .”²⁷

Yet, despite the utter want of reliable contemporary evidence to substantiate Briggs’ and Stead’s accounts, they continue to dominate naval historiography of the period, and the former’s charges regarding Northbrook and his Board continue to be accepted uncritically. It is high time that their perceptions and achievements were properly acknowledged.

True, Northbrook was employed extensively by Gladstone as a colonial finance troubleshooter and thus was often an absentee First Lord. However, the men who successively occupied the post of Parliamentary Secretary—Shaw Lefevre, Trevelyan, Campbell-Bannerman, and Thomas Brassey—were highly competent administrators, uniformly committed to maintaining an adequate naval force. Two of them, indeed (Shaw Lefevre and Trevelyan) had held the same job during the first Gladstone Ministry. The Admiralty was in capable hands, whether or not Northbrook was on the scene.

As for Briggs’ charge that Northbrook’s Board was concerned chiefly with keeping the Navy Estimates low, it is true that the sums voted yearly tended to be slightly lower than did those of the preceding administration.²⁸ Concealed behind this apparent confirmation, however, is the reality that the Liberals generally apportioned a significantly greater amount for shipbuilding than did the Conservatives, who preferred to spend the Navy’s funds on operations and repairs.²⁹ To get the real story, one need only consult the yearly departmental statements. When this is done, the true legacy of Northbrook’s stewardship quickly becomes apparent.

¹John Henry Briggs, *Naval Administrations 1827 to 1992: The Experience of 65 Years* (London, 1897). Briggs died five years before the book’s publication. His widow edited the manuscript.

²*Ibid.*, 216–17.

³He had served as Private Secretary to his father—Sir Francis Baring—when the latter was First Lord, 1849–51, and had subsequently occupied the posts of Civil Lord and Parliamentary Secretary of the Admiralty.

⁴Briggs, 212.

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

⁵Oscar Parkes, *British Battleships, 1860–1950* (London, 1957), 307.

⁶Arthur Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880–1905* (New York, 1940), 122

⁷Nicholas A. M. Rodger, “The Dark Ages of the Admiralty, 1869–1885 Part III: Peace, Retrenchment and Reform, 1880–85,” *Mariner’s Mirror* 62 (1976): 121.

⁸Parkes, 307. “. . . while we contented ourselves with the *Collingwood*, the French made 1880 a record year by laying down the *Hoche*, *Neptune*, *Magenta* and *Marceau*, all of about 10,600 tons, bringing their total since 1874 to 22 ships of 164,451 tons against our 13 ships of 107,220 tons.”

⁹Marder, *Anatomy of British Sea Power*, 120.

¹⁰Comments of Houston Stewart on Captain Nicolson’s Report #18, “The comparative strength of the English and French Fleets,” 15 November 1877, PRO: ADM1/6424.

¹¹Comments of Hood and Wellesley, *ibid.*

¹²Comment of Smith, *ibid.*

¹³Rice to F.O, 18 June 1880, bound papers relative to decision to build *Admiral* class, Surveyor’s Branch, 1 August 1881, PRO: ADM1/6608.

¹⁴Northbrook memorandum, 1 August 1881, bound papers relative to decision to build ‘Admiral’ class, Surveyor’s Branch, PRO: ADM1/6608.

¹⁵*Hansard*, 3d ser., 268 (1882), col. 1063.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 279 (1883), col. 135.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, col. 133.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 268 (1882), col. 1063.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 1063.

²⁰Minute by Lord Northbrook (Printed), July 1885, PRO: ADM1/7465c.

²¹Conway, 303–304. The *Dupuy de Lome* was begun in 1888 and the *Amiral Charner* in 1889.

International Journal of Naval History

Volume 1 Number 1

April 2002

²²Theodore Ropp, *The Development of a Modern Navy* (ed. Stephen Roberts, Annapolis, 1987), 140.

²³*Ibid.*, 246, 271.

²⁴John Beeler, “A One Power Standard? Great Britain and the Balance of Naval Power, 1860–1880,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 15/4 (December 1992): 551–54.

²⁵*Ibid.* The figure was £4.8 million, or 42.7%.

²⁶Campbell-Bannerman to Childers, 2 October 1884, printed in J. A. Spender, *The Life of the Right Hon. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, G.C.B.* (Boston, 1924), 1: 54.

²⁷Cooper Key to Geoffrey Phipps Hornby, 2 December 1884, printed in Parkes, 328.

²⁸Navy spending, 1874–80 (Conservatives):

1874–75	£10,279,898
1875–76	£10,680,404
1876–77	£11,063,449
1877–78	£11,364,383
1878–79	£12,536,591
1879–80	£11,962,816

The figures for 1878–79 and 1879–80 were significantly inflated by sums allotted from a Vote of Credit stemming from the Russian ‘War Scare’ of 1877–78. Some of this money went to ship purchasing, but much went to operations.

Navy Spending, 1880–85 (Liberals)

1880–81	£10,416,131
1881–82	£10,702,935
1882–83	£10,576,453
1883–84	£10,408,904
1884–85	£10,728,781

²⁹For coverage of the divergence between Conservative and Liberal construction policies, see John Beeler, *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866–1880* (Stanford, 1997), 154–56, 261–62.