



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/00253359.2017.1304700](https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2017.1304700)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lambert, A. D. (2017). Writing the Battle: Jutland in Sir Julian Corbett's Naval Operations. *Mariner's Mirror*, 103(2), 175-195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00253359.2017.1304700>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Writing the Battle: Jutland in Sir Julian Corbett's *Naval Operations*.

Sir Julian Corbett's *Naval Operations*, the Official History of British Grand Strategy and naval operations, was dominated by the need to understand and promulgate national strategic doctrine.<sup>1</sup> It should read as the culmination of his work stretching back the late 1890s, in which he had analysed the evolution of British strategy, and recovered the guiding principles for his audience, mid career and senior naval officers, statesmen and soldiers. It would be the basis for post-war service education, and the development of doctrine. These agendas forced him to reconcile the ghastly reality of total war on the European continent with pre-war expectations of a limited maritime conflict, exemplified by the Seven Year's War, 1756-1763. In his 1960s study of Britain's naval war Arthur Marder ignored the strategic dimension of Corbett's work, and his didactic agenda, underrated Corbett's influence on the Navy, and national strategy, and discounted his 'detailed, authoritative; restrained judgements' as a semi-popular treatment aimed at the public. He assumed, or at the very least implied, that the 'real' official accounts were contained in the Staff Histories, 'written by the Historical Section of the Naval Staff.'<sup>2</sup> In reality the Staff Histories, detailed operational and tactical studies, served a very different purpose to Corbett's grand strategic work, providing detailed analysis required for operational and tactical doctrine, work which Corbett never attempted, and was properly conducted by naval officers. Corbett's book was primarily intended for the Senior Officers' War Course, following the model he had established in 1907, and expounding strategic doctrine for post-war service leaders. While he may have hoped to record the successful application of a classic British limited maritime strategy, conducted by both services in close concert, culminating in devastating economic warfare, he was left to explain how that strategy had been deflected and distorted by the influence of politics, alliances, and alien strategic concepts.

Corbett arranged the operational-tactical narrative around a politico-strategic core that integrated operations into the higher direction of war, where civilian government, allied diplomacy and enemy policy interacted, with a critical focus on the civil-military interface. His sources were strikingly rich, reflecting close personal relationship with Maurice Hankey,

---

<sup>1</sup> Corbett, J.S. 'Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar' Creighton Memorial Lecture delivered 11.10.1921. *The Quarterly Review* April 1922.

<sup>2</sup> Marder, A.J. *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. Volume 5 1918-1919: Victory and Aftermath*. Oxford UP 1970 pp.306, 362.

all five wartime first Sea Lords, Battenberg, Fisher, Jellicoe, Jackson and Wemyss, and the Admiralty Secretariat. He discussed Jutland with Jellicoe, and other senior officers.<sup>3</sup> He had access the papers of Dardanelles Commission, Ian Hamilton's Diaries, and the personal correspondence of Henry Jackson, Rosslyn Wemyss and Roger Keyes, among others. He worked closely with Reginald Tyrwhitt, and possessed an inside track to the War Cabinet through Hankey a fellow maritime strategist, who provided insights from within the High Command in exchange for a succession of brilliant memoranda and other contributions.

After the war Corbett's work was contested by Winston Churchill and later David Beatty, who tried to block or deflect his criticism of their failings. While explaining Corbett's problems dealing with these powerful men his biographer, Professor Schurman, underestimated Corbett's resolve, determination and above all his success.<sup>4</sup> Neither Churchill nor Beatty could prevent his version of events reaching the public. When Admiral Sir Berkeley Milne publicly contested Corbett's account of the escape of the *Goeben* in 1920 he was roundly condemned by the mainstream press, which upheld *Naval Operations*, and above all Corbett's magisterial judgements.<sup>5</sup> The development of Corbett's account of Jutland demonstrates that the positions adopted by Marder and Schurman require attention.

Corbett explained his concept of official history in April 1913, to an audience of international academic historians, and British naval officers. Reflecting on his experience using Official Histories from other countries, and writing a confidential official history of the Russo-Japanese war for the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), he stressed the importance of strategic analysis, not tactical detail, the grand sweep of the past, not the piling up of facts. He condemned the massive tactical compilations produced by the Historical Section of the Great German General Staff.<sup>6</sup> As director of the Official History effort Corbett selected the other official historians,

---

<sup>3</sup> Corbett Diary (henceforth Diary) 20.5.1920: Corbett MS National Maritime Museum Greenwich (henceforth NMM) CBT 43/19

<sup>4</sup> Schurman, D. *Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922: Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe*. London 1981 pp.163-95 rehearses the process from Corbett's perspective, while those of Jellicoe and Captain John Harper were published by Temple-Patterson, A. ed. *The Jellicoe Papers Vol.II* London Navy Records Society 1968 pp.399-490.

<sup>5</sup> Cuttings and notes in the 1920 Diary from *Punch*, the *Times* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*: CBT 32./20.

<sup>6</sup> Corbett, J.S. 'Staff Histories' in Corbett, J. S. & Edwards, H.J. eds. *Naval and Military Essays: Being Papers Read at the Naval and Military Section of the International Congress of Historical Studies 1913*. Cambridge 1914. Corbett, J. S. *Maritime Operations in the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905*. by. Hattendorf, J. & Schurman, D.M. USNIP Annapolis 1994.

helped find commercial publishers, edited and approved all the official histories.<sup>7</sup>

After an intellectual career in which he had traced the upward curve of British strategic success and power Corbett faced the problem of dealing with failure and uncertainty. In *The Seven Year's War: A Study in Combined Strategy* of 1907 he had explained how the decisive fleet battle at Quiberon, which destroyed the enemy fleet, had been brought on by the success of a major combined arms operation at Quebec. This was what he meant when he wrote:

it must not be forgotten that convenient opportunities of winning a battle do not always occur when they are wanted. The dramatic moment of naval strategy have to be worked for, and the first preoccupation of the fleet will almost always be to bring them about by interference with the enemy's military and diplomatic arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast Volume III of *Naval Operations* would have to deal with Jutland and Gallipoli, altogether less compelling examples than Quebec and Quiberon, examples which seemed to call into question that doctrine. The educational importance of his texts, they were always intended to be the 'Bible' of the post-war War Course, the basis for Corbett's post-war lectures, made it essential to rationalise the Dardanelles/Gallipoli, and Jutland, demonstrate the relative unimportance of fleet battle, and lay out a higher, expressly maritime conception of the way in which British wars were won.

Although Corbett did not live to complete the project, his voice effectively stilled on the morrow of Jutland, he left ample evidence of his intentions, notably in a major public lecture on the Napoleonic conflict.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately he established the strategic model of how the war should have been waged, and then examined why it had ended up being fought along very different lines.

From the opening days of the war Corbett had been acutely conscious of the educational opportunity that could be drawn from the CID history project. Installed as the Admiralty representative, only civilian member, on the Historical Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on August 24<sup>th</sup> Corbett began collecting evidence and compiling a narrative account of the opening months of the war.<sup>10</sup> This work replaced his pre-war task, writing a confidential strategic analysis of the Russo-Japanese War, in

---

<sup>7</sup> His diaries evidence his role managing the history project.

<sup>8</sup> *Seven Years War* I pp.3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Corbett, J.S. 'Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar' Creighton Memorial Lecture delivered 11.10.1921. *The Quarterly Review* April 1922.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel, Col. E.Y. 'Official Histories' 3.9.1919. Cabinet Memo: TNA CAB 103/83 p.3.

late 1914. He recruited additional staff, authors, sailors and administrative support, largely from personal contacts. His position was relatively secure, because he had the complete support of Vice Admiral Sir Edmond Slade, chairman of the sub-committee, and Maurice Hankey, the increasingly powerful Secretary of the War Council. Both were colleagues and in Slade's case fiends, of long standing. Hankey pushed the official history project, and the necessary funding against stiff opposition from the Treasury, relying on Corbett's memoranda to break through the penny pinching mentality of the Department. It helped that he shared Corbett's strategic vision,

While Hankey was absent at the Dardanelles in August 1915 the Historical Sub-Committee proposed two 2 volume histories, dealing with Naval and Colonial, and Military Operations. Corbett would produce the former, Sir John Fortescue '(the historian approved by Lord Kitchener)' the latter. However, nothing was settled. In December 1915 the Treasury refused to provide fund the project. Corbett drafted a powerful memorandum, which Hankey signed before presenting it to Prime Minister Asquith. The case for an official history was 'very strong indeed'.

Owing to the development of modern rapid communications, censorship and secrecy have been carried to a pitch unknown in previous wars. The result is that the general public and even the professional sailor and soldier know very little of the history of the war. To this day, for example, very little is known of the movements of the Allied Fleets, nor of the great concerted naval and military operations which brought about the extinction of the German commerce destroyers. Such vitally important matters as the escape of the *Goeben* are a closed book to all but a very few. The despatches of the British Generals only illuminate one narrow portion of the land operations and give little idea of the huge combinations of which they formed but a minor part. The objectives and intentions of the Dardanelles and Salonica operations are quite imperfectly understood.<sup>11</sup>

The phrasing is Corbett's and so are the ideas. Treasury parsimony met with withering scorn. For the cost of three 15 inch shells the nation would ensure 'the useful services of the Section as an educational centre' as well as 'the actual history.'

Hundreds of millions are spent on the war and yet a few thousands are grudged to enable the State and the Services to benefit by its

---

<sup>11</sup> Hankey Memo 23.12.1915: CAB 103/68 p.4

experiences .... for history is the ‘Memory’ of the services, and without it the lessons will be forgotten alike by statesmen, sailors and soldiers.<sup>12</sup> Corbett believed the role of Official History was to help develop future doctrine, the ‘Soul of Warfare’.<sup>13</sup> Following prolonged negotiations between the relevant departments, Corbett was commissioned to write the official ‘interim’ public history for the CID in March 1916. It would be published by a commercial house, Longman, his usual publisher.<sup>14</sup> The decision was made public on 28 June 1916.<sup>15</sup>

*Naval Operations* would record the higher direction of a British war, emphasising ‘the deflection of strategy by politics’. It followed the model Corbett had established in *England in the Seven Year’s War: A Study in Combined Strategy* of 1907, based on courses taught at the Royal Naval War Course, and the Army Staff College, Camberley. Having analysed the evolution of British strategic doctrine across two hundred years, and situated that experience in a theoretical model largely developed from Clausewitz, Corbett produced a conceptual/doctrinal strategic framework in the officially sanctioned primer *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* of 1911.<sup>16</sup> These texts were the model and framework of the new book. Corbett approached the new project with two overriding aims: to restore the unique and specific British strategy based on sea control, economic warfare and combined operations; and contribute to the intellectual development of the War Course – tasks that would require him to revise and update *Some Principles*. His anxiety to ensure the experience of mobilising mass conscript armies for continental warfare should be recognised as unBritish and aberrational, was widely shared among the naval and political leadership. This ensured his would be the first Official History to appear. It would be the ‘bible’ of the post-war Naval War Course. When he resumed lecturing at Greenwich in 1920 he used early drafts from the *Naval Operations*.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately the new book would refresh and reinforce lessons derived from the age of sail.

In addition Corbett’s text had an important public information role, one that provided full scope for his core concept, ‘showing influence of fleet on war and prevent Army from getting out of focus... to keep the Navy

---

<sup>12</sup> Diary 20-22.12.1915: CBT 43/14. Hankey Memo 23.12.1915: CAB 103/68 p.8 & 9.

<sup>13</sup> Corbett, J.S. ‘Staff Histories’ in Corbett, J.S. & Edwards, H.J. eds. *Naval and Military Essays*. CUP 1914 p.24

<sup>14</sup> The official histories were handled by several publishing houses, mainstream and academic.

<sup>15</sup> TNA CAB 103/83 pp. 4, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Lambert, A.D. ‘Sir Julian Corbett, naval history and the development of sea power theory’ in N.A.M. Rodger, J. Ross Dancy, Benjamin Darnell and Evan Wilson eds. *Strategy and the Sea: Essays in Honour of John B. Hattendorf* Boydell and Brewer, Woodbridge 2016. pp.???

<sup>17</sup> ‘Imperial Concentration 1914’ four lectures, dated War College, Greenwich, March 8-11 1920: Corbett MS CBT23/3

paramount'.<sup>18</sup> Placing the strategic narrative in the naval volumes would ensure the 'continental' impression created by the sheer scale of the military effort did not distort post-war strategy.<sup>19</sup>

Corbett's war work began with creation of a running record, containing as much operational detail and strategic analysis as his inconsistent access to the higher direction of the war allowed. Used to the intellectual freedom of working on old wars, and the papers of long forgotten men, such restrictions were deeply frustrating.<sup>20</sup> Despite the obstructionism of Admiralty Chief of Staff Admiral Sir Henry Oliver, Corbett was able to advance the analytical sections of the work, and ensure his staff collected and began to process the evidence that emerged, producing drafts for him to rework, revise and improve. The end of the war improved access to material and men, enabling him to impose a coherent strategic narrative on the operational account. Alongside official archives he exploited private papers, interviews, and the growing stream of publications, British, German, French and American.

His purpose remained constant, to carry forward pre-1914 strategic doctrine, suitably refined, reinforced, and above all free from the taint of Army 'continentalism'. At the same time he had to address a new threat. The destruction of German naval power meant the greatest threat facing Britain was the United States, specifically the 'Freedom of the Sea' doctrines espoused by President Woodrow Wilson as the second of his Fourteen Points. For Corbett Wilson sought nothing less than the annihilation of seapower as strategy, and with that Britain's: position in the world. Wilson arrived at the Paris Peace Conference, backed by a massive battlefleet building programme, determined to crush British 'navalism' as comprehensively as he had Prussian 'militarism', and European imperialism. His underlying agenda was simple: to render naval power ineffectual, removing Britain from her position as global hegemon, to open world markets to American capital. Although Wilson had been forced to back down at Paris, by British statesmen who based their arguments on powerful memoranda written by Corbett, both they and he recognised the threat would require a radical response. Had he lived these issues would have occupied much of his attention as he moved towards a conclusion, linking his wartime role combating German 'navalism' propaganda in the United States, with his thinking about more inclusive Empire/Commonwealth structures. He stressed the need to avoid the appearance of seeking or acquiring

---

<sup>18</sup> Diary 16.3.1916: CBT 43/15. Schurman p. 165.

<sup>19</sup> Schurman p. 176

<sup>20</sup> Corbett to Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Bethell, commanding the Channel Fleet. The day after the Heligoland Bight action 1914: Bethell MS LHMAL 4-5.

overwhelming power at sea, which would only provoke others, and reducing the internal frictions of the imperial system, the better to secure the reality of power.<sup>21</sup> He would have seen in the unwillingness of Congress to join Wilson's 'League of Nations', or fund his coercive battlefleet, encouraging evidence that American hemispheric exceptionalism was far from dead. In January 1921 he compiled a paper on the strategic role of the Panama Canal in a war with the United States, and assisted Richmond address trade defence in such a conflict.<sup>22</sup> These tasks shaped his thinking as he worked on *Naval Operations*.

Corbett began with a three stage concept, based on Churchill's submission to the War Council of January 28<sup>th</sup> 1915, itself largely shaped by Lord Fisher's views, as set out in a memorandum Corbett had written. The strategic pattern was simple.

1<sup>st</sup> Phase: The clearing of the outer seas

2<sup>nd</sup> Phase: The clearing of the North Sea.

3<sup>rd</sup> Phase: The clearing of the Baltic.<sup>23</sup>

In Corbett's elegantly written, easily understood exposition of the maritime core of British strategy the deft touches of an experienced analyst and master of literary composition illuminated every page. The first two volumes were largely complete by the summer of 1918, awaiting secret material relating to the Grand Fleet. The influence of the text was immediate. Jellicoe refused to set off on his Empire Mission to consider post war imperial naval policy before receiving an advance copy of volume I, because he 'knew nothing that had occurred in the outer seas' while Commanding the Grand Fleet. This was precisely the function Corbett had outlined in his December 1915 Cabinet paper. Proof copies were supplied, 'just in time' for Jellicoe and chief of staff, Frederick Dreyer to sail on HMS *New Zealand*.<sup>24</sup> Their impact can be read in Jellicoe's report.

Corbett's first two volumes traced the strategic direction of the war as Britain systematically cleared the outer seas of German ships and colonies, crushed the cruiser threat to ocean shipping, and then launched the great naval attack on the Dardanelles, followed by the amphibious strike at Gallipoli. His position on the Turkish adventure was clear: it had been the

---

<sup>21</sup> Corbett to Sir George Aston 23.5.1918: Aston MS LHMAL. Aston was not convinced, he preferred absolute dominion.

<sup>22</sup> Diary 13.1.1921 – 19.1.1921: CBT 43/20

<sup>23</sup> Churchill statement to the War Council of 28.1.1915: Gilbert, M. *Winston S. Churchill. Vol. III Companion Part I*. London 1972 p.463 henceforth *Companion*.

<sup>24</sup> Jellicoe to Corbett 1.2.1919 & Corbett's endorsement. CBT 7/15. Patterson, A T. ed. *The Jellicoe Papers Vol. II*. London Navy Records Society 1968 p.324. See also 283, 400-3, 412-19 for correspondence with Corbett.

only truly strategic combined operation of the war, and had to be studied in depth, but it had not been the best option.

Corbett always believed that the strategic concept he had outlined for Fisher in the famous ‘steady pressure’ paper was correct, and that Fisher’s plan to drive the Germans off the Belgian coast and back into the Heligoland Bight, before threatening to enter the Baltic was viable.<sup>25</sup> Allowing Fisher to publish the paper in his *Memoirs* in 1919 ensured it had wide public circulation before *Naval Operations* appeared. By that time Corbett knew that he faced a major problem: something far more serious than Churchill’s foolish self-serving objections. He would have to explain the failure of British maritime strategy, and he would use the concept of ‘the deflection of strategy by politics, which had been a core argument of his 1911 doctrine primer, to do so.

Volume II ended with the dramatic departure of Fisher and Churchill, the Army locked into the Western Front and the Navy entangled in the Gallipoli debacle, the consequence of a series of strategic blunders that had wrecked the combined concept at the heart of Corbett’s concept of national strategy, while leeched vital specialist assets away from the primary maritime strategic targets, recovering the Flanders coast and taking control of the Baltic. He settled the treatment of Fisher’s resignation in discussions with George Lambert MP, one-time Admiralty Civil Lord and Fisher’s literary executor. Lambert invited him to write the official biography, a task he could not take up, and promised to assist him if Beatty contested his critical account of the Dogger Bank action.<sup>26</sup>

Corbett began writing Volume III after the war ended, and the Cabinet had come close to abandoning the whole project.<sup>27</sup> He did so in the knowledge that the failure at Gallipoli and the apparently ‘indecisive’ outcome of Jutland posed critical challenges to his concept of British strategy, and the Royal Navy’s primacy in national defence. He began volume III on May 31<sup>st</sup> 1920.<sup>28</sup> Returning to work after major surgery Corbett outlined his approach to his old friend Henry Newbolt: ‘I mean it to be my book, not the Admiralty’s or anyone else’s. I find it fairly easy to employ my opinion in

---

<sup>25</sup> Fisher Cabinet Memorandum 25.1.1915: Gilbert, M. *Companion* pp.263-4. Corbett Diary 25.1.1915: CBT43/14

<sup>26</sup> Corbett was the first choice to write Fisher’s authorised biography. Diary 29.12.1920; 16 & 24.2.1921; 16.3.1921: CBT 43/19 & 20. Lambert spoke in the House on the subject. A biography of Fisher written by the man who best understood his strategic thinking, his focus on deterrence, and his wartime policy, might have transformed our understanding of the ‘Fisher Era’, shattering the reputations of weak-willed statesman and wooden headed general.

<sup>27</sup> Corbett’s Diary between January 1919 and April 1920 demonstrates that he was not working on Jutland, the second phase at Gallipoli, or anything else covered in Volume III.

<sup>28</sup> Diary 31.5.1920: CBT 43/19

telling the story without saying anything that is likely to cause obstruction.<sup>29</sup> That last claim may have been overly optimistic.

Corbett located the failure at Gallipoli in the politics of Grand Strategy, and the weakness of Russia, concluded that Britain had not employed the 'normal' maritime strategy because it was tied to France and Russia, a sound, if slightly forced analysis reinforced by stressing the synergy between the 'Western Front' views of the French and the British General Staff. He implied that had Britain been acting under effective political direction, as it had in the Seven Year's War, it would have employed a maritime/expeditionary strategy, and upheld the national interest against the demands of temporary allies. Indeed, Corbett openly admired the ruthless way in which British statesmen of the eighteenth century had abandoned allies in 1713 and 1762, to secure national objects.

Having rescued the strategic consequence of combined operations from the debacle at Gallipoli, Corbett moved on to explain Jutland, to ensure it was understood as a victory, one he could link to past precedent, and the final allied victory. While death denied him the opportunity to develop that theme in *Naval Operations*, he sketched the conclusion in a lecture on 'Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar', delivered on October 11<sup>th</sup> 1921 to an audience that included the First Lord and members of the Naval Staff.

Corbett had been well aware of the contested nature of Jutland from the beginning. He discussed the battle with many officers, including Jellicoe, reading his *Grand Fleet* in February 1919, a text that influenced his own treatment.<sup>30</sup> Jellicoe's book, and the subsequent controversy, may have prompted First Sea Lord Sir Rosslyn Wemyss' decision to commission a detailed narrative, without analysis, based on navigational records. Not only would such a text be immensely valuable to the official historian, but it might end the unseemly row brewing between the officers of the Battle Cruiser Fleet and the Grand Fleet. Captain John Harper completed his report just before Beatty replaced Wemyss at the Admiralty. Publication was delayed while Beatty, and the former Battle Cruiser Fleet officers who dominated his team, attempted to revise passages that showed them in a bad light, including the infamous 360 degree turn, poor gunnery and failure to report the enemy's position. Harper requested a formal written order to make the revisions, which was never provided, while the furore obliged Jellicoe, who believed the report should be published without interference from himself or Beatty, to become involved.<sup>31</sup> Aware that Beatty was attempting

<sup>29</sup> Corbett to Newbolt 12.11.1920: CBT 3/7/92

<sup>30</sup> Corbett to Jellicoe 13.2.1919: Add. MS 49,037 f.128

<sup>31</sup> Jellicoe's side of the story was published in 1968 in the *Jellicoe Papers II* at pp.458-90.

to rewrite the battle Herbert Richmond observed: ‘A pity this as it will open the way to controversy afterwards’.<sup>32</sup> It is unlikely Corbett was unaware, but he had more pressing matters in hand at that time.

Corbett’s ‘battle’ of Jutland began on August 9<sup>th</sup> 1920. While on holiday with his family in North Wales he received a telegram from Beatty, requesting an urgent meeting. Returning to London he found a letter from Beatty, asking him to compile a forward to contextualize Harper’s Jutland Report, and claimed new evidence demonstrated ‘that the gunnery of the British Fleet was of a very high standard.’<sup>33</sup> He confided to his diary: ‘they wanted me to write a foreword to Jutland report to explain how good our gunnery was & only failed thro’ bad shells against good armour - mean to get out of doing it if I can’. Without missing a beat Corbett reverted to the law, his original profession, telling Beatty that Longman’s contract gave them an exclusive right to publish an account based on official records. Admiralty Secretary Oswyn Murray, also the long-serving Treasurer of the Navy Records Society, ‘jumped at the idea that Longman’s position might provide an occasion for dropping the whole thing & handing it all over to me.’ Despite Corbett’s explanation of the legal position Beatty remained hopeful.<sup>34</sup> In the end Beatty had to accept defeat, he could not publish Harper’s Report without a foreword to counter clear factual statement that highlighted his tactical failures, and poor gunnery resulted in defeat. A few days later Corbett learnt that Beatty’s approach followed Jellicoe’s rejection of a draft Admiralty forward, and proposed alterations to the text, which were ‘not justified by the records taken at the time, particularly the gunnery records and ranges.’ The foreword had been withdrawn, but battle raged over Beatty’s proposed textual changes, which Jellicoe insisted on approving. He was anxious to see Corbett’s account.<sup>35</sup> A second meeting at the Admiralty revealed the Secretariat was anxious to suppress Beatty’s ‘Admiralty’ forward, so Corbett called at Longman’s, and ‘redrafted’ the protest ‘in official style’.<sup>36</sup> In June 1921 Corbett settled that Jutland would appear at the end of volume III, as yet unwritten, basing himself on Harper’s

---

<sup>32</sup> Marder, A.J. *Portrait of an Admiral: The Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond*. Cape London 1952 p.361.

<sup>33</sup> Beatty to Corbett 12.8.1920: Corbett Ms LHMAL

<sup>34</sup> Beatty to Corbett 17.8.1920: Corbett Ms LHMAL

<sup>35</sup> Diary 9-18.8.1920: CBT 43/19. Jellicoe to Corbett 16.8.1920: Corbett MS LHMAL

<sup>36</sup> Diary 3-4.9.1920 CBT 43/19

Report and charts. Jellicoe promised to help, in return Corbett agreed to send any new material to the Admiral before publication.<sup>37</sup>

Defeated by Corbett's skilful use of contract law, and frustrated by his inability to change the Harper Report Beatty commissioned another text.<sup>38</sup> In November 1920 Captain Walter Ellerton, the Director of Training and Staff Duties, directed Captain Kenneth and Lieutenant Alfred Dewar to prepare a secret appreciation of the action, based on Admiralty Records, and the Harper Report, while based in his Department. They were assisted by Lieutenant John Pollen, attached to Corbett's section at the CID to work on the charts, Pollen had already assisted Harper. Dewar often worked at the CID, meeting Corbett on several occasions.

Dewar's approach to Jutland was dominated a long-held conviction that the Navy needed a tactical system based on divisional principles, something he had discussed with Corbett in 1917. At that time he hoped that 'if the history of this war is studied critically and fearlessly it will form the foundation stone of a new navy', with a modern system of command.<sup>39</sup> By September 1921 Dewar's draft was complete, but Captain Alfred Chatfield, as ACNS, demanded revisions to tone down the severe criticism of Jellicoe. One hundred copies of the final version were printed as Confidential Book 0938 in late December. The date is important. Dewar opened his final paragraph with a direct rebuttal of the 'decisive battle' point Corbett made in his lecture 'Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar' on October 10<sup>th</sup> 1921. Dewar had discussed Jutland with Corbett four days before the lecture, and it seems that the last sentences of Corbett's lecture 'What material advantage did Trafalgar give that Jutland did not give? It is one that, in the present state of our knowledge, I will not venture to answer'<sup>40</sup> were a critique of Dewar's ideas.<sup>41</sup> This was provocative, and Dewar's riposte was even more explicit: his last paragraph read:

It has been said that a great victory would have given us no more than we had. This is a lame commentary on the battle. It is not only a repudiation of the teachings of Nelson and Mahan, but it involves an entire misconception of the subsequent workings of the submarine

---

<sup>37</sup> Corbett to Jellicoe 13.6.1921: Add. Ms 49,037 ff.162-3. Modern sensors have demonstrated that Harper's charts were highly accurate. See: McCartney, I. *Jutland: The Archaeology of a Naval Battlefield*. London, Bloomsbury 2016 for the latest survey of the battlefield. . Diary 19.8.1921: CBT 43/20

<sup>38</sup> Schleihauf, W. & McLaughlin, S. eds. *Jutland: The Naval Staff Appreciation*. Barnsley, Seaforth 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Dewar to Corbett 15.2.1917: CBT 13/3/24 He was especially effusive about Corbett's concept of control of communications. Dewar commanded the monitor HMS *Roberts*, stationed to defend Great Yarmouth. /Buxton, I. p.31-2.

<sup>40</sup> Corbett, J.S. 'Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar' Creighton Memorial Lecture delivered 11.10.1921. *The Quarterly Review* April 1922

<sup>41</sup> Diary 6.10.1921: CBT 43/20 Schleihauf p.208. Roskill, *Beatty* p.333

campaign, and reduces contemporary British strategy to the level of a farce. It is better to look facts in the face. The Battle of Jutland can only be regarded as the beginning of a great battle which was ever driven home. By studying its history we may redeem our shortcoming and discover another and sounder conception of tactics and command.<sup>42</sup>

The Admiralty Board intended to use Dewar's text as the basis for an expurgated 'Fleet edition', for naval circulation, and after editing out any remaining criticism of Jellicoe, for public consumption. John Pollen was instructed to produce a version 'free from criticism and comment'.<sup>43</sup> When Pollen told Corbett about this Corbett repeated Longman's argument.<sup>44</sup> Dewar visited Corbett at the CID in late December to inform him that he had finished his work, and would hand over all the evidence, along with the 'super secret appreciation unexpurgated.'<sup>45</sup> Corbett received copy number 9 of the 'Staff Appreciation' in early 1922, just as he began writing up Jutland. By the second week in February, while engaged on the 'Run to the South', he advised Captain Vernon S H Haggard, the new Director of Training and Staff Duties (DTSD), that Dewar's version was divisive and misleading. A week later Haggard reported that Dewar's volume would not be published, requesting Corbett return his copy.<sup>46</sup> He resisted the request, advising Jellicoe that:

The presentation of the facts seemed to me so faulty that I felt it my duty to intimate that my narrative would have to be entirely different. Whether similar opinions were expressed in other quarters I do not know. But in a few days I was informed that its issue was to be stopped.<sup>47</sup>

Dewar lectured from the Staff Appreciation to the Naval Staff Course in 1922, only to be derided by an audience that included John Harper and several veterans of the battle.<sup>48</sup>

While he disagreed with Dewar's handling of the battle it is unlikely that Corbett objected to his introductory argument about the central role of the Baltic in British strategy. 'Germany's practically undisputed control of the Baltic was a grave obstacle to the blockade, and acted as a powerful impetus to neutral trade. In addition to supplies from the West, it covered the

---

<sup>42</sup> Schliehauf p.208.

<sup>43</sup> DTSD to Pollen 28.11.1921: BTY /9/5

<sup>44</sup> Diary 17.10.1921: CBT 43/20

<sup>45</sup> Diary 23.12.1921: CBT 43/20

<sup>46</sup> Diary 15, 24 & 27.2.1922 & 10.3.1922: CBT 43/21. Captain Haggard. DTSD to Corbett 23.2.1922: BTY /9/5. Schliehauf p.xxiv

<sup>47</sup> Corbett to Jellicoe 10.3.1922: Add. Ms 49,037 ff.172-3. for Harper see: *Jellicoe II* pp.458-90.

<sup>48</sup> Harper to Admiralty 3.6.1927: *Jellicoe II* p.482

important Swedish iron ore traffic, which, in the opinion of the French General Staff, was as vital to Germany as the supplies from the Lorraine and Luxembourg districts.’ If the High Seas Fleet ‘had been decisively defeated, a British squadron could have entered the Baltic.... Operating from Russian bases such a squadron would have tightened the commercial blockade, and opened the road or moral and material support to the Russian armies.’ Dewar also stressed how the High Seas Fleet had kept the Heligoland Bight open for the passage of submarines.<sup>49</sup>

Corbett’s account of the battle cruiser action, the ‘First Phase’ was ready to be typed up on February 16<sup>th</sup>. He discussed the next phase with Richmond two days later, enlightening him on ‘strategical aspects of the battle which he had never understood.’ By March 15<sup>th</sup> at the latest Corbett had accepted the need to cut Volume III in half, in order to include a full treatment of Jutland, advising Longman accordingly.<sup>50</sup> In his last public speech he enlightened diners at the Naval Club with some reflections on his task, and his relationship with the Admiralty ‘which seemed to amuse them’.<sup>51</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> he was working on the ‘Second Phase’, the Grand Fleet approach to battle. He spent the 31<sup>st</sup> at the Admiralty with Captain William ‘Bubbles’ James, Assistant DID ‘on various points on Jutland, especially on my differences with Dewar, whose facts were I fancied very loose.’<sup>52</sup> The revised typescript of the Second Phase was discussed with Daniel and Bell on April 6<sup>th</sup>, and the ‘Third Phase’, the main fleet exchanges, on the 8<sup>th</sup>. That done Corbett sent the draft to Jellicoe, just before taking his customary Easter holiday.<sup>53</sup>

At this point Corbett broke off from Jutland to review the chapters dealing with the Gallipoli evacuations, completed in late 1921, before it was typeset. Once settled at Stopham he began the night actions of the ‘Fourth Phase’, which were finished by early May, and then launched straight into the ‘Last Phase’, the morning after.<sup>54</sup> Much of May was spent correcting Jutland and the Gallipoli evacuation, and then clearing contentious passages with the Naval Staff.

In the middle of this hectic schedule Corbett discussed whether to accept a quarter of a million pounds for one of the London streets in the family portfolio. He and his brother Charlie decided against.<sup>55</sup> Corbett’s financial

---

<sup>49</sup> Schliehauf pp.10-12.

<sup>50</sup> Diary 15.3.1922: CBT 43/21

<sup>51</sup> Diary 21.3.1922: CBT43/21

<sup>52</sup> Diary 31.3.1922: CBT 43/21

<sup>53</sup> Diary 6-10.4.1922: CBT 43/21

<sup>54</sup> Diary 12.4. – 11.5.1922: CBT 43/21

<sup>55</sup> Diary 4-6.6.1922: CBT 43/21

position was such that he did not need to work, let alone to carry on the punishing schedule indicated by his diaries. Determined to complete the task he ignored obvious signs of failing health, major surgery for bladder stones, high blood pressure, pulmonary problems and bad teeth, working six or seven days a week, often long into the evening.

The last section of Jutland was sent to be typed in mid June. At the end of the month further corrections from John Pollen were worked in, and shared with Jellicoe.<sup>56</sup> While Jutland was being revised Corbett began the 'Home Waters' chapters, XIII and XIV, which linked the Gallipoli evacuations to Jutland. Jellicoe read his account of Jutland, 'highly approving of what I had done & inclosed the mods prepared for a new edition of his *Grand Fleet* – containing many additions for further information & answers to current criticism.' Corbett responded:

My general impression on the whole affair now is that nothing you could have done could have forced Scheer to decisive action except meeting him in the morning between him and his base and this he prevented simply because the necessary information which the Admiralty had intercepted was not passed on to you.

At the same time he pressed Jellicoe for more details of the routes he had believed open to Scheer, perhaps the most acute question that anyone asked him.<sup>57</sup> Having worked through the evidence, and formed his own conclusions, Corbett the first half of the book to the Admiralty, Foreign Office and War Office on the same day, leaving himself more time to work on the controversial sections. On July 18<sup>th</sup> he learnt that Dewar's account would not be published, and claimed full credit for that decision.<sup>58</sup> Haggard's report on Dewar's 'Staff Appreciation' adopted Corbett's argument and, from the decidedly legal terms in which he expressed himself, a good deal of his language as well.

The mental attitude of the writer was rather that of a counsel for the prosecution than of an impartial appraiser of facts, and an obvious bias animates his statements throughout the book, leading to satirical observations and certain amount of misrepresentation.

Chatfield and Keyes recommended the book be suppressed, and destroyed almost all the copies, not only was it full of 'satirical observations', 'bias' and 'misrepresentation', it also deprecated the line of battle, and could hardly be sent out while this tactic remained central to naval doctrine, and above all

---

<sup>56</sup> Diary 13-20.6.1922: CBT 43/21

<sup>57</sup> Corbett to Jellicoe 19.6.1922: Add. Ms 49,037 ff.177-9. There is no evidence of a reply.

<sup>58</sup> Corbett to Jellicoe 18.7.1922: Add. Ms 49,037 f.182. Diary 17-8.7.1922: CBT 43/21. Corbett's innate modesty makes the claim compelling.

because publication would ‘rend the Service to its foundation’.<sup>59</sup> They turned to Pollen’s expurgated edition, which deleted three chapters, and all reference to Room 40. Pollen was chosen as a chart expert without literary skill or imagination to alter the underlying message. The deleted chapters, I, II and VIII set out Dewar’s argument that a ‘decisive victory’ would have prevented the submarine campaign, and opened the Baltic, his critique of Jellicoe’s Grand Fleet Battle Orders, and the indictment of his deployment of the fleet at 6.15 pm. Haggard and Pollen settled the abridged edition.<sup>60</sup> While Keyes agreed to publish the work would not appear before *Naval Operations*, because Longmans, assisted by Corbett, insisted on their contractual rights.<sup>61</sup> Pollen’s *Admiralty Narrative* finally appeared in 1924.<sup>62</sup>

Meeting Hankey on June 27<sup>th</sup> Corbett told him that his account ‘would show how Beatty spoiled the battle. If he objected I could not alter. Hankey said then it would have to go to Cabinet.’<sup>63</sup> Satisfied that he was right Corbett would not back down to a mere First Sea Lord. On August 1<sup>st</sup> Corbett and his family went to Stopham for the summer, where he worked hard reviewing the Jutland drafts, a task that occupied the entire month. There were some major issues to address, as he told Jellicoe:

Since writing the battle-cruiser action I have seen the secret report and am altering or rather reinforcing their gunnery failure as contrasted with that of 5th BS.

The way the Operations Division dealt with the intercepts seems to have left much to be desired and I have already noted specially the omission to send you the one about the air reconnaissance off Horns Reef. From the nature of the case I cannot say as much as I would like on this point. The summaries that were sent you were obviously misleading. I have *all* the intercepts now...

This letter disposes of the claim that Jellicoe had been unaware of the signals intelligence failure, and emphasizes how Corbett’s final version evolved through constant interaction with evidence and actors, even as the final draft was being compiled. He valued Jellicoe’s input: ‘your notes will enable me

---

<sup>59</sup> Memo by DTSD to ISL (Beatty) and DCNS (Roger Keyes) 26.7.1922: *Beatty Papers II* pp.454-5.

<sup>60</sup> Haggard (DSTD) to ISL & DCNS 26.7.1922: Ranft., B.M.ed. *The Beatty Papers II* London, Navy Records Society 1993 pp.454-5

<sup>61</sup> Corbett to Jellicoe 20.8.1922: Add. Ms 49,037 ff.186-7.

<sup>62</sup> Schliehauf p.xxv. Alfred Dewar used his brother’s arguments when reviewing volume III in the *Naval Review*, generating further disputes, and when Churchill sought advice on the battle for *The World Crisis*. Beatty and Keyes recommended consulting Kenneth Dewar, and loaned him a copy of the *Staff Appreciation*. Churchill’s account of the battle, influenced by Dewar’s text, and charts, was severely criticised by Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, the public voice of the Jellicoe school.

<sup>63</sup> Diary 27.7.1922: CBT 43/21

to improve and strengthen the narrative in many places. But it is a great satisfaction to me to have your approval of it as a whole.<sup>64</sup>

The first two chapters were sent back to London in early September, followed by the preliminary Chapters XIII, XIV and XV, Corbett received the remaining three Jutland chapters on September 9<sup>th</sup>. Four days later the first page proofs of the volume reached him, Bell came down on the 19<sup>th</sup> with charts and papers for a day's work. In a characteristic comment Corbett that the 20<sup>th</sup> was 'A Lovely Day' ... He died on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, without writing another word in his diary. Colonel Edmond Daniel RM, a friend and colleague for twenty years, undertook to ensure his text was not 'interfered with in any way after it has left this office. But I anticipate considerable trouble with the present Board of Admiralty over certain passages.'<sup>65</sup> Daniel was well aware what those troubles would be.

To ensure his readers recognised the linkage between the failure to put pressure on the enemy outside the North Sea and the limited success of naval action within it Corbett produced a strategic overview of the campaign in Home Waters between the evacuation of the Gallipoli beachheads and Jutland. Gallipoli had crippled the development of maritime strategy, as Fisher had feared, putting 'it out of the power of the fleet to influence the general course of the war by high offensive action in Home waters.' While avoiding explicit judgement on the relative strategic merits of Gallipoli and the Baltic, he observed that the Dardanelles had dragged critical human resources to the Mediterranean, weakening the combat power of the Grand Fleet.<sup>66</sup> He noted Jellicoe's protests against the constant drain on skilled manpower from shipyards as well as the fleet, which delayed the completion of new ships, and exacerbated the difficulty of fitting them out. These, he inferred, were faulty dispositions of resources.

Corbett set up Jutland by demonstrating how the Royal Navy had crushed Germany's ability to use the North Sea for trade and fishing, and reduced the naval threat posed by surface mine-laying through active patrolling into the Skagerrack. More ambitious operations, on the German Coast, or into the Baltic, remained impossible without deployable troops, and while so many heavy ships, flotillas, and most of Fisher's 'Siege Fleet' were committed to Gallipoli.<sup>67</sup> Ever on the look out for corroborating evidence Corbett inserted Reinhard Scheer's judgement that the British understood the wisdom of holding 'immovably on the ocean communications' too well 'ever to throw

---

<sup>64</sup> Corbett to Jellicoe 3.8.1922: Add. Ms 49,037 f.183.

<sup>65</sup> Diary August-September 1922: CBT 43/21. Daniel to Jellicoe 2.10.1922: Add. Ms 49,037 ff.189-90

<sup>66</sup> NO III p.259

<sup>67</sup> NO III p.273

it way by clamouring for a hazardous advance into German waters'.<sup>68</sup> Recognising the Corbettian nature of British strategy, and the crushing impact of the blockade on Germany's war effort, Scheer had no option but to challenge the Grand Fleet's grip. This subtle message, carefully spun out of British policy and German reactions, undermined the 'decisive battle' school, and prompted Beatty's spiteful rejoinder.

The strategic emphasis stretched beyond British decision-making: 'The sanguine illusions with which the Great General Staff has plunged into the war had faded away. Their cherished doctrine was failing them. The cardinal article of their creed was to crush the armed forces of the enemy by a swift and unrelenting offensive.'<sup>69</sup> While the text pointed to the failure of German thinking the real target was closer to home, leaving out the signifier that the Staff in question was German Corbett encouraged readers to understand the passage as a criticism of British continentalism, a point emphasised by the subsequent section, which stressed the strategic impact of British and allied operations outside Europe. Here he exploited the memoirs of General von Falkenhayen, Chief of the German General Staff, and Kurt Hellfrich, the Secretary of State, which recorded the change in German strategy and the shift towards unrestricted U-boat warfare.<sup>70</sup> Corbett obtained Tirpitz's *Memoirs* in December 1919, working into volumes I & II retrospectively, those of Reinhard Scheer appeared four months later.<sup>71</sup>

Corbett began the build up to Jutland with the dawning realisation in Britain that the failure at Gallipoli meant something had to be done to force the Germans to shift their focus to the North, and this meant 'reviving Fisher's 'still-born plan', and seizing any opportunity 'to upset the German war plans by forcing them to dissipate forces for the defence of their northern front', ideally by landing in Denmark, if 'the neutrality of Denmark, like that of Belgium, should be violated by the enemy.'<sup>72</sup> Fisher's Baltic plan remained the capstone of British strategy, using maritime/economic power to defeat larger, more populous continental states. He condemned the misuse of Fisher's 'special fleet', eaten away by the Dardanelles, and sending the troops evacuated from Gallipoli to moulder at

---

<sup>68</sup> NO III pp.274-5 citing Scheer, R. *Germany's High Seas Fleet in the World War*. London Cassell 1920 p.96 Taking command in January 1916 Scheer expected British resolve to harden, along with the economic blockade, because of the high cost of the conflict, 'and to compensate for the blunders made, such as the surrender of Antwerp and the abandonment of the Dardanelles enterprise.' The link between Scheer's remarks on Antwerp and Corbett's view of the subject in 1907 is compelling. Corbett 1907 I pp.74-5, 142.

<sup>69</sup> NO III p.279

<sup>70</sup> NO III pp.280-1, 287.

<sup>71</sup> For Tirpitz: Diary 30.11.1919-2.12.1919: CBT 43/18. Scheer 7-8.4.1920: CBT 43/19

<sup>72</sup> NO III p.314

Salonica, which meant there were no troops at hand to support operations in the North Sea area, not even to hold Zealand.

In the summer of 1916 the absence of deployable armies in the Northern theatre condemned both sides to naval or, in Corbett's terms minor, strategies, any prospect of a major offensive further constrained by the critical defensive roles that both fleet occupied in increasingly continental strategies. Despite this the movements that culminated at Jutland were the most ambitious yet undertaken by either Fleet. After a succession of sorties which tried to bring on a major battle by staging pin-prick air raids and mine laying in the North Sea Jellicoe finally accepted the compelling strategic logic of the war. Only by threatening Germany's grip on the Baltic could he influence German strategy. Consequently he:

prepared a plan that went beyond anything he had yet hazarded. Two squadrons of light cruisers were to proceed to the Skaw, which they were to reach by dawn on June 2. Thence they would sweep right down the Kattegat as far as the Great Belt and the Sound, while a battle squadron would push into the Skagerrak in support. Such a bait, it was hoped, could scarcely fail to draw a strong enemy force from the Bight. Possibly, as had happened before, they would not come far enough north to ensure an action, but at least they might be lured into a trap.<sup>73</sup>

The trap consisted of a new minefield and submarines at the Horn's Reef, the northernmost exit from the German minefields.

In the event the Germans sortied before Jellicoe's plans could be put into effect, seeking to draw Jellicoe over a submarine ambush, and then destroy a portion of his fleet. While we can only speculate on the effect Jellicoe's operation might have produced the overriding importance of the Baltic in British war planning explained why Jellicoe was in the Skagerrak on 31 May, while the date was determined by political pressure. David French stressed: 'the 1916 campaign was conducted by a government which badly needed some spectacular victories to increase its waning authority'.<sup>74</sup> Little wonder there was widespread disappointment that the naval battle that finally occurred was not a new Trafalgar.

Corbett stressed that Jellicoe's primarily defensive mission, covering the British coast and the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron, meant his base was too far north, leaving little time to locate and defeat an enemy fleet in the German Bight. Yet he was satisfied that the chances of battle were high when the Clausewitzian friction of war intervened, drawing a pointed analogy

---

<sup>73</sup> Corbett III p.320.

<sup>74</sup> French p.181.

between Jellicoe's position and that of Nelson in March 1805, when Villeneuve evaded a brilliant ambush by pure luck. The deliberate reference to *The Campaign of Trafalgar* stressed his contention that Jutland and Trafalgar had secured the same result.<sup>75</sup> Finally there was the all-important issue of friction. The chance sighting of a Danish steamer brought the Battle cruisers into contact before Scheer had come far enough north to suit Jellicoe. Scheer had recognised his good fortune.<sup>76</sup>

To get his book past an Admiralty Board packed with Battle Cruiser officers Corbett found excuses for the strikingly poor gunnery of Beatty's ships in the 'Run to the South, including destroyers steaming past on the engaged side that spoiled the range, and Jellicoe's contention that poor quality shells had saved the Germans.<sup>77</sup> Instead he described the shooting of the 5th Battle Squadron as 'magnificent', leaving readers to contrast it with the lamentable efforts of the battle cruisers. Relying on 'irrefutable' facts Corbett was highly critical of Beatty's turn to the East, his failure to maintain contact with the enemy and his own light cruisers, during the Run to the North, and his failure to provide Jellicoe with accurate information about enemy course and speed. He was also criticised for passing across the front of the Grand Fleet, obscuring Jellicoe's range at a critical moment. The infamous 360 degree turn by HMS *Lion* was mentioned, as a 'complete circle', along with the seven minutes that it took to complete.<sup>78</sup> Recognising the limits of his position, disbarred from 'judgement' Corbett selected his facts with care, leaving his readers to grasp the deeper import of his words by 'reading between the lines.' This was not unreasonable: his target audience were mid to senior ranking naval officers, men who did not need his help to grasp the meaning of the evidence.

Jellicoe emerged as a paragon of command. Corbett began by setting out Jellicoe's doctrine of fighting a main fleet battle at 15,000 yards to avoid the torpedo threat.<sup>79</sup> He also drew attention to Jellicoe's deployment into line as the 'supreme moment of the naval war', a tactical move that placed him in the pantheon of modern fleet tacticians. The argument was reinforced by linking him with the great pre-war Admirals, Wilson, Bridgeman, May and Callaghan. He explained Jellicoe's decision to avoid night action through an analogy with 'The Glorious 1<sup>st</sup> of June', assuming his readers did not need to be reminded of details of the older battle. Lord Howe's decision to wait for

---

<sup>75</sup> NO III pp.328-9 & Corbett, J.S. *The Campaign of Trafalgar*. Longman, London 1910 pp. 55-56.

<sup>76</sup> Scheer p.141.

<sup>77</sup> Diary 24.1.1919: CBT 43/18: NO III pp.333-7.

<sup>78</sup> NO III pp. 355-6, 360, 365, 373.

<sup>79</sup> NO III p.347

another day to ensure he had enough time to complete his battle was a powerful precedent – not least because the dates so nearly matched. Both Jellicoe and Howe had outmanoeuvred the enemy, taking station between them and their base, forcing them to give battle.<sup>80</sup>

To explain how the enemy had escaped, despite Jellicoe's strategic success, Corbett emphasised the role of contingency, 'the good fortune which the Germans had earned by their bold movement stood by them' in the night action. Furthermore there had been serious failures by British divisional commanders. The most glaring was that of Commodore Farie, leading the 13<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla, who effectively opened a path for Scheer through the British destroyers. As a result 'the impossible had happened. In spite of the massed flotilla rear guard Admiral Scheer had succeeded in passing across his adversary's wake during the hours of darkness, and without injury to a single capital ship.' Not only was Jellicoe excused, but post-war Naval War Course students should understand that destroyer flotillas could not be relied on to stop battle fleets at night.<sup>81</sup>

Finally Corbett gave the Germans agency. Unlike the brave amateurs Nelson had annihilated at Trafalgar they were the equal of the British unit for unit, and Jellicoe had been wise to treat them as such. Corbett emphasised Scheer's 'bold and skilful' performance, developing a point he had established earlier in the book, where he credited the 'skill and boldness' of Lt Cmdr Hersing of U21 in his 'brilliant' attack on HMS *Majestic* at Gallipoli. Retreating in the face of 'a greatly superior force' because he could not risk a fleet action, Scheer had done 'enough for honour'. Evading the trap which Jellicoe had set for him was 'enough to enrol his name high upon the list of fleet leaders.' Just how high became clear in a long footnote, stressing the connection between Scheer's battle plan and Nelson's Trafalgar Memorandum. Scheer had a final stroke of luck: he avoided the submarine ambush Jellicoe had positioned at the Horn's Reef, because the boats had been directed to expect the enemy on June 2<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>82</sup> By emphasising the skill and determination of the enemy, making Scheer and his fleet worthy opponents, Corbett distanced Jutland from Trafalgar, reinforcing his stress on the contingent nature of battle, where chance, friction and the unforeseen compromised every plan. Raising Scheer to the pantheon of great Admirals, in line with the Admiral's own estimation, and stressing the quality of the High Seas Fleet reduced the disappointment of an incomplete victory.

---

<sup>80</sup> NO III pp.361, 368, 388, 407. Barrow, J. *Life of Admiral Lord Howe* p.232 Corbett owned a copy of this book.

<sup>81</sup> NO III pp.404-5.

<sup>82</sup> NO III pp. 418, 30-31, 374 fn.

‘Decisive’ victory had not been a necessary, or perhaps wise, object for Jellicoe.

Volume III ended without a conclusion on Jutland, whether he elected not to essay one in what was already a profoundly controversial volume, or thought it better to link his analysis to the shift of strategic focus that would follow in volume IV is unknown. We can be certain that it was not because he had simply run out of space. Corbett followed the same model used in *The Seven Year’s War* and *Trafalgar*, with a detailed build up to emphasise that ‘decisive’ battles had to be worked for, using large scale combined operations against strategically critical enemy targets, followed by a relatively short battle narrative. *Naval Operations* should be read as an extended analysis of how British strategy was intended to work, and why it had failed on this occasion. The argument was carefully constructed to explain the failure without challenging the underlying pattern. Gallipoli should have been a new Quebec, a successful combined operation that obliged the enemy to risk his fleet in offensive operations, leading to its’ destruction at a new Quiberon. The causes of failure were primarily the disarticulation of combined strategy, which saw a British Expeditionary Force, designed to support maritime strategy, committed to open-ended continental operations. This led to a purely naval attack on the Dardanelles, followed by a belated, under-resourced amphibious effort. Fisher’s Baltic vision had the power to unsettle the Germans, the evidence suggests that a British fleet entering, or even threatening to enter, the Baltic would have prompted a German invasion of Denmark.<sup>83</sup> Corbett never lost sight of Fisher’s vision, or the resources he created to conduct it. The opportunity to test the thesis, which Jellicoe planned for early June 1916, had been lost when Scheer launched his own operation.

For Corbett the critical point in 1916 was the absence of a modern version of General Craig’s Expeditionary Force, whose dispatch to Sicily prompted Napoleon to order Villeneuve to sea in October 1805, just as the loss of Canada had dragged France into an invasion plan in 1759. That the destination of Craig’s troops had been a strategically vital island which, like Zealand, commanded key maritime arteries was not accidental. Corbett had recognised the contemporary resonance of the analogy back in 1910 – when he had stressed ‘the old law which gives to such expeditions as Craig’s a disturbing power out of all proportion to their intrinsic force, was beginning

---

<sup>83</sup> The evidence is compelling. Groß, G.P. ‘German Plans to Occupy Denmark “Case J” 1916-1918’ in Clemmesen, M. & Groß, G.P. eds. *The Danish Straits and German Naval Power 1905-1918*. Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt. Potsdam 2010 pp.155-166.

to work'.<sup>84</sup> The strategic significance of Jellicoe's projected advance into the Kattegatt had been fatally weakened by the lack of military manpower. Had Jellicoe advanced with an uncommitted army loitering offshore in transports the High Seas Fleet would have been forced to fight to the finish for the Baltic narrows. Ultimately Corbett's treatment of the contested issues of 1915 and 1916 massaged the events of the day, and indeed the rest of the war, to ensure the book worked effectively as doctrine primer, something he had done in all his works since 1907. His management of the evidence, clarity of argument and considerable literary power ensured this was precisely the book his well-defined target audience required. Furthermore the experience of the First World War had changed his assessment of the Napoleonic conflict, leading him to argue that the true significance of Trafalgar had been obscured behind wave of unthinking patriotism.

Corbett's text ended with the Grand Fleet returning to base on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1916. It did not include his after action assessment, or, more significantly, any analysis of strategic consequences. Fortunately we know what he thought. Not only had he discussed the subject in his 'Napoleon' lecture but when in 1928 Henry Newbolt finally published volume IV in 1928, after Beatty had left the Admiralty, he reflected on the 'irreparable' loss the project had suffered, and the 'coincidence' that 'the first stage of the war had been brought to a definite conclusion' at Jutland. 'The period of great naval operations in the old sense was over: the remaining volumes... were to deal with a new kind of war, a naval war on a vast scale, but conducted mainly by blockade and counter-blockade, both unexampled in kind: and with a moral struggle in which the vital conflict at sea was inseparably interwoven with a conflict of imponderable forces.'<sup>85</sup> There was something strikingly Mahanian about this, echoing the division of *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, where Trafalgar ended the fleet battle phase of the war, and the 'Continental System' began the next. This may have been Corbett's scheme, and it may have been discussed with Daniel. The appearance of a favourite Corbett word 'strategical', on the first page of Newbolt's book seems to reflect that legacy. Newbolt's judgement on Jutland stressed that command of the North Sea had not been challenged, that the blockade remained unbroken, and the superiority of the Grand Fleet had been enhanced.

Despite Beatty's anxiety to prevent the appearance of an 'Official' account of the battle that endorsed Jellicoe, he was powerless. He took a

---

<sup>84</sup> Corbett 1907 II pp. 1-4. Corbett 1910 p.274 . In both cases the purpose of the discussion was current doctrine, not historical reflection.

<sup>85</sup> Newbolt IV 1929 p.v.

coward's revenge, back-stabbing a dead man, burdening he the book with an Admiralty disclaimer:

Their Lordships find that some of the principles advocated in this book, especially the tendency to minimize the importance of seeking battle and of forcing it to a conclusion, are directly in conflict with their views.<sup>86</sup>

The minute had been written by Keyes, Churchill helped with phrasing.<sup>87</sup> Anxious to avoid anything that might harm sales Corbett's long serving publishers neatly hid it behind a diagram of Jellicoe's deployment on the port column – an image that emphasised the scale and power of the Grand Fleet, and Jellicoe's victory. By publicly disassociating the Service from a book consciously crafted to enhance public appreciation of the Navy's role in the war the Admiralty shot themselves in the collective foot. In his defence Beatty, as a First Sea Lord waging war with the Treasury over the budget, could not allow his reputation to be publicly lowered. The aura of glory was vital to his political position. Set against the medium term future of the Navy factual truth was not so great a prize as historians might imagine.<sup>88</sup> Jellicoe had the last word: 'I find it difficult to express my admiration for the style of the narrative, the language in which it is expressed, and its accuracy.'<sup>89</sup>

*Naval Operations* was written to support post-war naval education and doctrine development, connect the World War with past practice, and above all to rescue national strategy from the lazy assumption that the only way to defeat Germany had been to copy the German approach to war – mass armies and 'decisive battle'. The next time Britain went to war it ended up waging Corbettian war for eighteen months against a major European coalition, because it had no other choice. This was not dissimilar to the position it occupied between 1807 and 1812, and in both cases the enemy overreached themselves, providing Britain with allies who took up the burden of mass warfare on land. Corbett's text laid out the underlying strategic concepts with compelling clarity, along with his judgement that Fisher, and Fisher alone, had the vision and ability to create a coherent grand strategy, consistent with British experience, and exploit the emerging strategic opportunities. He used Jutland to demonstrate that the effective development of British strategy depended on the combined action of navy and army, that 'decisive' naval battles were set up by the effective use of

---

<sup>86</sup> *Naval Operations vol. III* London 1923 introduction

<sup>87</sup> Keyes to Churchill 2.11.1940: CHAR 20/5/82. Churchill MS Churchill College Cambridge.

<sup>88</sup> See the rabid responses to Vol.III by Dewar, Chatfield and Walter Cowan in *Keyes Papers III* pp. 85–90.

<sup>89</sup> Jellicoe to Colonel Daniel 16.2.1923: *Jellicoe Papers .II* p.438

military force, and that unless an enemy was compelled to fight to the finish in defence of higher, strategic interests, it was unlikely any naval combat would have significant strategic impact. Furthermore victory in naval battle was remarkably unimportant, as long as Britain retained sea control. On those grounds he publicly declared Jutland had served the Britain as well as Trafalgar. While he did not live to complete the 'official' version of that argument, or bring his deep engagement with the decisive quality of commanding the Baltic to a resolution, *Naval Operations* signposted his conclusions and, supplemented by his other publications, his correspondence and records provides ample evidence of that higher strategic purpose.