

THE PAST AND FUTURE OF THE BRITISH NAVY

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The Past and Future of the British Navy by E. Plunkett

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E. PLUNKETT

**THE PAST AND
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BRITISH NAVY**

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OF
THE BRITISH NAVY.

BY
THE HON. E. PLUNKETT,
COMMANDER R.N.



*Non illi imperium pelagi, sævumque tridentem,
Sed mihi MARS datum.*

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LONGMAN, BROWN, GREEN, AND LONGMANS,
PATERNOSTER-ROW.
1846.

1341.

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INTRODUCTION.

A FEW words, not as preface, for that, no one would read; but, to explain the writer's views as to the paramount necessity of proportioning and adapting our naval organisation to the new era which has commenced in maritime affairs.

I do not allude to those changes, alone, which steam will make, though the introduction of that power will *accelerate* the operations of war almost as much as it has of travelling; but to the improvements both in the nature and use of naval ordnance,—improvements, which competent judges consider will make future actions at sea far more decisive and destructive than any thing we have heretofore experienced, or can

easily imagine. The introduction of shell-guns alone is likely to double the loss in *personnel*, and to make the total destruction of ships, by foundering or explosion, an ordinary occurrence in naval actions.

But this is only one of the many improvements which have brought the *matériel* of naval ordnance to a degree of perfection our predecessors dreamed not of. Let any one look at the heavy and well-appointed tiers of a line of battle ship's guns; what formidable batteries are there! Not a gun under a 32-pounder, and many 8-inch shell-guns. How perfect in all their appointments! How simple yet how scientific those tangent sights, by which a distant object is struck with such wonderful precision! How excellent the arrangement of all the stores, and how rapidly are those ponderous pieces of ordnance manœuvred by skilful hands!

“ Surely there is nothing more to desire here,” it will be said! No, not while the *personnel* corresponds to the *matériel* as now in peacetime it often does: but good indeed should be the gunners to whom this battery is confided. No such ordnance ever accompanied an army; and the three hundred guns which thundered at Waterloo, or at the great artillery battle of Vittoria, were pop-guns in comparison to these.

Yet to whom shall we have to entrust these destroying weapons, if we commission ten or twenty sail of the line to-morrow? At best, to raw merchant sailors—to men pressed out of coasters and colliers—to men who never saw a gun before,—to men who will blow off their own arms in loading, break their own or their neighbour's legs in firing, and point their guns, if they *do* point at all, as a school-boy does his new single-barrel, when he aims at a rabbit and shoots a beater.

I am not an alarmist nor a croaker; still less do I write with any political bias or personal motive. I do not underrate the vast additions to the material resources, nor the improvements in various departments of the Navy which have taken place of late years, and which *must* have taken place to maintain our relative position in a time of general progress.

But with the fullest confidence in our unimpaired naval resources, with a conviction that, humanly speaking, successes as brilliant as the past are in our power, I dread the application of an old system to entirely new circumstances. I believe the time is gone by when seven or eight hundred men scraped together in any way, and put into a ship of war, can be trusted to fight our battles. Against the Americans, who, though our equals in seamanship, follow our own system,

it *may* answer,—though it is throwing away all the chances derivable from a state of organised preparation: but against our *next-door neighbours* it might be attended with serious consequences.

At the commencement of former wars, which followed each other at short intervals, we always found some man-of-war's-men unemployed; or at the worst we opposed undisciplined seamen to men equally undisciplined and inferior as sailors. But in the event of a future war with France we may be sure of one thing: she will not send her ships to sea with untrained crews. Her position respecting colonies, and her peace-time[?] arrangements, do not require it; and against trained gunners mere seamanship will not always decide a battle. Yet beyond seamanship what can we look for in the merchant sailors, whom we expect to obtain by pressing, and who in these days will find themselves towed out to sea by steamers, and perhaps in action before it has been possible to teach them their first lesson in gunnery?

In mentioning France, here and elsewhere, I do so; first, because we cannot speak of our Navy irrespectively of an opponent (abstractly it is neither strong nor weak, adequate nor inadequate); and, secondly, because France, unlike