The Myth of a Naval Revolution by Proxy: Lord Fisher’s Influence on Winston Churchill’s Naval Policy, 1911–1914

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ABSTRACT Revisionist historians have argued that in July 1914 Britain’s First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, was preparing to implement a ‘Naval Revolution’ based on radical ideas they attribute to Admiral Sir John Fisher. This article examines Fisher’s influence on Churchill in 1911–14. By subjecting the revisionist argument to rigorous scrutiny, it demonstrates that Churchill did not embrace either ‘flotilla defence’ or the ‘battleship concept’, the two central components of Fisher’s supposed radical agenda. On the eve of war, Churchill’s immediate goals were neither revolutionary nor inspired by Fisher. The weakness of the revisionists’ argument undermines their broad interpretation of naval policy during the Fisher era.

KEY WORDS: Churchill, Fisher, Naval Revolution, Royal Navy

The ‘orthodox’ interpretation of British naval policy in the ‘Fisher era’, with its emphasis on Anglo-German competition in dreadnought-style battleships, was firmly established in the 1960s by Arthur J. Marder.1 Today, historians are sharply divided over Marder’s legacy. A small school of revisionist historians led by Jon Sumida and Nicholas Lambert have proposed a radically different interpretation.2 In their version of events, Britain’s First Sea Lord in 1904–10, Admiral Sir John Fisher, did not conceive of HMS Dreadnought, the first all-big-gun battleship, as the centrepiece of his famous reforms. His actual goal, which remained a closely-guarded secret, was allegedly to transform the Royal Navy’s force structure through radical technological innovation.

2The main revisionist works are those by Lambert and Sumida noted in the bibliography.

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Instead of relying on an expensive fleet of large, heavily armoured battleships to protect Britain, the Navy would deploy swarms of submarines and flotilla craft to ensure that no enemy would dare attempt an invasion – an innovation Lambert dubbed ‘flotilla defence’. This, in turn, would release Britain’s capital ships, in the form of fast, lightly-armoured battle cruisers, to protect British interests in distant waters (the ‘battlecruiser concept’). Fisher’s attempts to implement these changes in 1904–10 were reputedly obstructed by his more conservative colleagues, but the revisionists have argued that in 1913–14 the Admiralty secretly adopted Fisher’s clandestine programme, and was on the verge of implementing changes so far-reaching as to constitute a ‘naval revolution’ when its plans were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War.  

Over the past decade, virtually every major argument advanced by the two leading revisionist scholars has been challenged by what might now be termed ‘post-revisionist’ historians. In particular, recent scholarship has discredited claims that Fisher developed a radical programme in 1904–10 based on the twin ideas of flotilla defence and battlecruisers, and that this programme was dusted off by Winston Churchill and nearly realised by the Admiralty in 1914. Historians are now confronted with a complex and confusing landscape in which enduring ‘myths’ established decades ago by Marder on the basis of dated research and old-fashioned methodologies co-exist uncomfortably with convoluted revisionist arguments that are increasingly difficult to sustain. In the interest of clearing a path forward, this article will test one critical component of the revisionist case for a Fisher-inspired ‘naval revolution’ in 1914: the idea that the admiral’s radical programme was accepted by Churchill and other leading decision-makers and formed the basis of secret plans in the months leading up to the First World War. The goal here is not to advance an alternative interpretation of British naval policy in 1913–14, which has been done

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3The first statement of the case for a ‘naval revolution’ was Sumida’s ‘Fisher’s Naval Revolution’, Naval History 10/4 (1996), 20–6. However, this should be read in conjunction with Nicholas Lambert, ‘On Standards: A Reply to Christopher Bell’, War in History 19/2 (April 2012), 217–40.

elsewhere, but to highlight the serious errors of interpretation and methodology underpinning the revisionist thesis.\(^5\)

**The Structure of Naval Revolutions**

A well-established and seemingly authoritative narrative is not easy to displace, as the revisionists themselves lamented when they first challenged the work of Arthur Marder.\(^6\) By the mid-1990s, however, Sumida evidently believed the work he and Nicholas Lambert were producing was so momentous as to necessitate a full-fledged ‘paradigm shift’, in the Kuhnsian sense.\(^7\) In other words, the revisionists maintained that the entire conceptual framework expounded by Marder was fundamentally flawed and should be discarded rather than modified. In its place they proposed a new paradigm, one constructed around their own research and analysis. Naval historians have generally given the revisionists a sympathetic hearing, and sometimes an enthusiastic one, but their interpretation has not been embraced by the wider historical community. Two reasons suggest themselves for the persistence of the orthodox perspective.

First, Marder’s interpretation has not, to borrow again from Kuhn, gone through an obvious crisis. The traditional paradigm remains compatible with the documentary record and fits with the conclusions of most historians working in this and related fields. Thus, Marder continues to offer credible, documented explanations for what happened. The revisionist interpretation, on the other hand, asserts that what Fisher and a few other leading figures secretly wanted to accomplish is more important to understanding this period than what they and others actually did.

Second, the revisionist paradigm is not self-evidently superior when it comes to making sense of the archival evidence. Lambert and Sumida have had to go to great lengths to explain why the archives so often seem to be working against them.\(^8\) They have argued that Fisher’s

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\(^5\) Bell, ‘Fisher’s Naval Revolution Reconsidered’ and ‘On Standards and Scholarship’.


programme was so secret that only a few hints of it were ever recorded; that many documents that would support their interpretation were deliberately destroyed to conceal decision-makers’ true intentions; and that the records that do survive are misleading, having been created for political purposes rather than as an accurate record of Admiralty policy. The fact remains, however, that much of the revisionist interpretation is constructed on a virtual archival vacuum.

To offset the paucity of evidence to support their interpretation, the revisionists have emphasised their research skills and analytical acumen. In the process, Marder’s reputation has taken a battering. Sumida, for example, condemned Marder for his ‘antiquated historical technique’ and ‘methodological backwardness’, dismissing him as mere ‘scissors-and-paste’ historian who supposedly believed that ‘evidence could be gathered and comprehended without recourse to creative thought’. The message here is that Marder’s work is not just flawed, but flawed beyond repair. Given Marder’s well-deserved reputation as a diligent and energetic researcher, the revisionists have faced something of an uphill battle. Nevertheless, they do make a valid point: Marder’s work might have been state-of-the-art in the 1960s, but that does not make it the final word in the history of the Fisher-Era Navy. Later generations of historians, after all, have access to more documents than their predecessors, if not always the same ones, and can employ more sophisticated methodologies. To emphasise this point, the revisionists are quick to extol their own research. Sumida, for example, maintains that Lambert ‘had to master’ a far larger body of primary and secondary sources than Marder, and to re-examine ‘virtually all of Marder’s archival materials’.

In a similar vein, Katherine Epstein asserts that the revisionist interpretation ‘is really the first orthodox history based on adequate command of the relevant primary sources’. In other words, Lambert and Sumida were the first historians to achieve sufficient ‘critical mass’ in their research to produce a reliable history of the Royal Navy.

The revisionists also argue that the Royal Navy, like any modern military organisation, can only be understood, in the words of Sumida and David Rosenberg, through ‘the integrated examination of technical, personnel, economic, administrative and financial factors in order to reinterpret the course of policy-making and its consequences in operations’. In this they are undoubtedly correct. Moreover, they

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10Ibid., 177.
12Sumida and Rosenberg, ‘Machines, Men, Manufacturing’, 30.
appear to be preaching to the converted. It would be difficult to find naval historians who would disagree with the premise that navies are extremely complex organisations, and that the methodologies employed by earlier generations have been improved upon. Touting the superiority of their own methods is therefore another means for the revisionists to demolish the ‘orthodox’ paradigm. The implication is that the methodology employed by Marder and others of his generation was so primitive that their conclusions were not just superficial and unreliable – and therefore subject to minor corrections or elaboration – but the result of a process so defective they can only be wrong. However, it is important to recognise that there are two distinct propositions here, which need to be disentangled. The first is explicit and uncontroversial: historians will usually benefit from uncovering new evidence and by developing more sophisticated explanatory models. The second is implicit: the revisionists, by adopting new methods and privileging new evidence, must have produced more reliable conclusions than their predecessors.

The latter proposition will be tested here by scrutinising claims that Britain was on the verge of a ‘naval revolution’ in 1914 based on a secret programme allegedly developed by Fisher in 1904–10. The first challenge for the revisionists is to explain why a naval revolution in July 1914 should be attributed to Fisher at all. The admiral held no position of authority at the Admiralty between his resignation as First Sea Lord in January 1910 and his re-appointment in October 1914, so he could not have implemented any new policies himself in July 1914, revolutionary or otherwise. The revisionists therefore argue for a revolution-by-proxy. Fisher’s ideas provided the blueprint, but an ‘agent of change’ was necessary to implement it.¹³ Thus, according to Lambert, ‘even though Fisher’s immediate successors at the Admiralty abandoned flotilla defence and altered much of his strategic policy after his retirement in 1910, within two years worsening financial problems led to them being resurrected by a dynamic new civilian head of the Admiralty – Winston S. Churchill’.¹⁴

Sumida’s Naval Revolution

In view of Churchill’s well-known regard for Fisher and willingness to seek the admiral’s advice, this aspect of the revisionist interpretation is at least plausible. A 1995 article by Jon Sumida entitled ‘Churchill and British Sea Power, 1908–1929’ provided the first description of the

¹³Sumida, ‘Fisher’s Naval Revolution’.
¹⁴Nicholas Lambert, Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press 1999), 10–11.
process by which the Liberal politician supposedly absorbed and implemented Fisher’s revolutionary ideas. The article is dismissive of the possibility that the future First Lord might have formed ideas of his own about naval policy and strategy before he met Fisher in April 1907. And curiously, given the stated subject of the article, Sumida shows almost no interest in Churchill’s views on seapower at this time other than those he may have absorbed from Fisher. The politician is thus reduced at the outset to a virtual blank slate. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Fisher did make a strong impression on the rising star of the Liberal Party. Churchill recalled their first meeting in his memoirs:

We talked all day long and far into the nights. He told me wonderful stories of the Navy and of his plans – all about Dreadnoughts, all about submarines, all about the new education scheme for every branch of the Navy, all about big guns, and splendid Admirals and foolish miserable ones, and Nelson and the Bible, and finally the island of Borkum. ... when I returned to my duties at the Colonial Office I could have passed an examination on the policy of the then Board of Admiralty."

On the basis of this recollection, and with no other documentary evidence to support him, Sumida jumps to the conclusion that Fisher revealed the details of his secret programme of battlecruisers and flotilla defence to the politician during their earliest meetings, at a time the admiral was supposedly going to great lengths to conceal his real plans from ‘a hostile Liberal government’. Given that Churchill would soon achieve a reputation as a leading opponent of heavy naval expenditure within the Liberal Cabinet, he seems an unlikely confidant for Fisher. Nevertheless, Sumida assumes that Churchill was informed of the admiral’s secret agenda at this time, and that he had doubts about ‘the practicability of Fisher’s vision’, which led him to decline the opportunity to become First Lord in March 1908. All this appears to be pure speculation.

Having established that Churchill could have been aware of Fisher’s alleged secret plans, Sumida offers a new perspective on the famous crisis over the 1909 Navy Estimates. Churchill, he suggests, was

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‘probably sceptical about the First Sea Lord’s capacity to deliver his revolutionary changes in naval force structure. However much he might have approved of Fisher’s attempt to achieve a naval new order and been tempted by the potentially large economies that it offered, the risks of playing that game were too high.’\textsuperscript{19} Thus, despite the absence of supporting evidence, Sumida suggests that Churchill was generally sympathetic to Fisher’s plans. This being the case, he confidently asserts that the well-known friction between Churchill and Fisher at this time ‘was not what it seemed’. Their differences were not really over ‘the magnitude of the German danger or Fisher’s ideas on capital ship design – areas where there was in fact substantial agreement – but about Churchill’s trepidation with regard to the devious and hazardous course being pursued by the First Sea Lord’.\textsuperscript{20} This interpretation is also entirely conjectural.

Churchill’s conversion to Fisher’s agenda began in earnest, according to Sumida, after the former became First Lord in October 1911. It is well known that Churchill was eager to hear Fisher’s views after taking up his new office, and that he was generally receptive to many of the former First Sea Lord’s suggestions. The two men met at Reigate Priory in Surrey in late October and exchanged numerous letters during Churchill’s first weeks at the Admiralty. Fisher had strong opinions on a variety of subjects, including the composition of the new Board of Admiralty and other senior appointments, warship design, and the commissioning of officers from the lower deck. However, Fisher’s influence on Churchill should not be exaggerated. The young First Lord sought and received advice from many directions, including Fisher’s bitter rival, Admiral Lord Charles Beresford.\textsuperscript{21} Churchill is also well-known for forming his own idiosyncratic views on service issues.\textsuperscript{22} As Ruddock Mackay’s biography of Fisher observes, ‘Churchill exercised rather more discretion in sifting Fisher’s imaginative but erratic advice than one may readily glean from The World Crisis.’\textsuperscript{23}

For the purposes of this article, the critical issue is Fisher’s influence on Churchill’s views on battlecruisers and submarines. Sumida makes two important claims, both based on surviving documents. First, on 10 November 1911 Churchill proposed to include four battle-cruisers in the 1912–13 Navy Estimates.\textsuperscript{24} Second, Fisher pronounced around the same time that he had ‘converted’ Churchill on the question of

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{20}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22}Christopher M. Bell, \textit{Churchill and Sea Power} (Oxford: OUP 2012).
\textsuperscript{24}Churchill to Battenberg, 10 Nov. 1911, WSC, II/2, 1326–7. In fact, the changes under consideration would have applied to the Navy’s 1911–12 programme. Sumida evidently assumes that it was too late to modify that year’s programme in Nov. 1911, even
submarines. From these two documents Sumida infers that Churchill was, at least temporarily, persuaded to press Fisher’s radical ideas on the Admiralty. This is partially borne out by Churchill’s actions over the next few weeks. In his letter of 10 November, Churchill revealed to Vice-Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg, soon to be installed as Second Sea Lord, that he was contemplating the construction ‘of a new type of [battle-] cruiser’, provided that secret plans under consideration proved satisfactory. This refers to the design of the battlecruiser already authorised in the 1911–12 estimates. Churchill also remarked that if his new design were approved, he contemplated building four such vessels. Ten days later, Churchill held up the 1911 battlecruiser to allow time for different specifications to be considered. On 12 December the Board of Admiralty approved a modified design for what would become HMS Tiger. If Churchill was serious about building four such vessels, the idea was short-lived. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that Churchill’s views on the design of battle cruisers probably were inspired by Fisher. But that does not mean he automatically accepted Fisher’s alleged views on how these ships should be employed.

The obvious problem with Sumida’s thesis is that it conflates Churchill’s support for building battlecruisers in 1911 with approval of the ‘battlecruiser concept’. However, there is no evidence that an increase in battlecruiser construction was meant to reduce Britain’s needs for cruisers to protect the empire’s far-flung trade and communications. Similarly, Sumida infers from Fisher’s remark that he had ‘converted’ Churchill on submarines that the First Lord believed it was possible, in Sumida’s words, ‘to rely on submarines to defend Britain from invasion’. Thus, Sumida also makes the mistake of conflating ‘submarines’ with ‘flotilla defence’. However, Fisher’s letter to Maurice Hankey, Naval Assistant Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence, makes no such connection, something that becomes clear from parts of the document not quoted by Sumida:

I had an ‘all night sitting’ with Winston and converted him. These new class ‘E’ submarines with 4 inch quickfiring guns, 4,000 miles radius of action, 5 torpedo tubes and absolutely self-sustaining and more weatherly than the Mauretania [a large, fast British liner] and fitted with wireless and that only a stone wall can prevent going into any harbour will revolutionize naval warfare and make the United States eager for our friendship when

though the normal practice was to start work on ships at or near the end of the fiscal year, in this case March 1912.

26Board of Admiralty minutes, ADM 167/45.
Germany eventually goes for Brazil because of her overflowing population!

Sumida has defined ‘flotilla defence’ as the use of large numbers of submarines ‘in the restricted seas surrounding the British Isles’ to act as a barrier to invasion, but Fisher is looking here to the use of submarines along the enemy’s coastline, and even in its harbours. Hence, the documents cited by Sumida support the idea that Churchill was impressed by Fisher’s general arguments about the value of battlecruisers and submarines, but he provides no evidence that in 1911 Fisher proposed, and Churchill accepted, both the ‘battlecruiser concept’ and ‘flotilla defence’.

The next challenge for Sumida is to show that Churchill, after some initial hesitation, eventually decided to accept the two main elements of Fisher’s radical programme. The case for flotilla defence is a difficult one. To begin with, Sumida acknowledges that Churchill’s interest in submarines was driven in part by his desire to develop a new type of fast ‘fleet’ submarine capable of operating with a battlefleet. This worked against the adoption of flotilla defence, according to Sumida, by disrupting ‘production of the patrol submarines that were needed to implement Fisher’s radical flotilla strategy for the defence of home waters’.  However, this display of independent thought by the First Lord was evidently not an insurmountable obstacle to the realisation of Fisher’s programme. Driven by financial necessity, Churchill supposedly decided to adopt flotilla defence after seeing the performance of Britain’s newest submarines in the Navy’s 1912 and 1913 manoeuvres. Sumida asserts that Churchill and his advisers became convinced these vessels would be ‘capable of inflicting heavy losses on any battle fleet that attempted to maintain active control of the North Sea’.  Later that year, the First Lord decided to increase Britain’s production of submarines in the 1914–15 estimates through a policy that has been labelled ‘substitution’, in which funds for additional submarines would be provided by reducing the number of battleships in that year’s building programme. Again, Sumida assumes that any scheme involving submarines must necessarily mean ‘flotilla defence’. He therefore concludes that in January 1914 ‘one of the principal aspects of Fisher’s radical program had been adopted’.

There are numerous problems with this argument, the most serious being the claim that the 1912 and 1913 manoeuvres demonstrated the feasibility of ‘flotilla defence’. These exercises were designed to test the

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28 Ibid., 12.
29 Ibid.
Navy’s ability to prevent a German raid or invasion. The conclusion Churchill drew in 1912 was that coastal patrol flotillas ‘did not achieve any tactical purpose’ in the exercises.\textsuperscript{30} The situation was not much different the following year, when the ‘blue’ (British) submarines had a decidedly mixed record in meeting ‘red’ landings on British shores.\textsuperscript{31} Vice-Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, commander of the red force, was completely successful in his first try. ‘Red’ surface ships disabled three ‘blue’ submarines defending the Humber estuary and, in the absence of the ‘blue’ fleet, were able to disembark troops at Immingham and Grimsby. The second ‘red’ raid was also a complete success for the attackers. This time, Jellicoe put troops ashore in Blyth and Sunderland before safely withdrawing his covering forces. The only notable success for the defenders came on the next ‘red’ raid, when a concentrated force of ‘blue’ submarines and destroyers successfully attacked a second ‘enemy’ force at Blyth.\textsuperscript{32} The final attempt by Jellicoe to land troops was cancelled the following day because the blue fleet, which had retired for coaling, would be unable to interfere. Churchill was not willing to risk another demonstration of the vulnerability of British shores. In his memoirs he noted that Jellicoe ‘achieved so considerable a measure of success that I thought it necessary to stop the manoeuvres on the third day lest we might teach the Germans as well as ourselves’.\textsuperscript{33}

Jellicoe’s second attack on Blyth certainly demonstrated the potential of submarines to deal with an enemy raid when present in large numbers at the required location, but the complete success of the two previous raids could have inspired little confidence in ‘flotilla defence’ as Britain’s sole line of defence. If this had been the case, there would have been no reason to curtail the manoeuvres in the absence of the ‘blue’ fleet. Indeed, the lack of armoured vessels would have been an ideal opportunity to test the viability of ‘flotilla defence’. That Churchill clearly anticipated another ‘red’ success in these circumstances suggests he had no intention of relying solely on light craft, and no desire to showcase their limitations. The principal lesson drawn from the 1913 manoeuvres by naval leaders was that a British fleet would have great difficulty intercepting an enemy raid unless stationed far enough south


\textsuperscript{31}A good account of these manoeuvres and their consequences is provided in Morgan-Owen, ‘Invasion Question’, 197–204.

\textsuperscript{32}Admiral of the Fleet Sir William May, ‘Naval Manoeuvres 1913: Report by Umpire-in-Chief’, Aug. 1913, 17, ADM 116/1176C.

to respond immediately to German movements, which would increase the risk of attack on the fleet by torpedo craft. Naval opinion was solidly against this. The Admiralty war staff therefore concluded that since the Navy could not be certain of preventing an enemy landing, the Army must not be allowed to denude Britain of regular troops. Britain’s political leaders were receptive to this argument. After extensive debate in the Committee of Imperial Defence’s Invasion sub-committee, it was decided in February 1914 that in the event of an expeditionary force being dispatched to France, two divisions of British regulars would be kept in Britain to deal with the enemy raids. This shows that naval decision-makers were not won over to the idea of ‘flotilla defence’ in early 1914, despite Sumida’s assertions to the contrary.

Sumida has a more difficult time making a plausible case that Churchill also revived Fisher’s ‘battlecruiser concept’ before the outbreak of war. The most serious obstacle to overcome here is Churchill’s obvious loss of interest in battlecruisers after his initial enthusiasm in 1911 faded. By early 1912, Churchill began consistently to support the construction of faster and more heavily armed battleships; no battlecruisers were included in the Admiralty’s 1912–14 estimates. This creates a serious obstacle for Sumida, whose article on Churchill does not address the First Lord’s views on battlecruisers after 1911. However, Sumida’s willingness to give flotilla defence centre-stage was short-lived. In a 1996 article entitled ‘Fisher’s Naval Revolution’, he attempts to extend the life of the ‘battlecruiser concept’ past 1911 by implying that Churchill continued to see a role for Britain’s existing battlecruisers in the protection of British interests outside the North Sea. He does this in two ways. First, by noting that Churchill built up a force of battlecruisers in the Mediterranean, a measure he mistakenly assumes was intended to be permanent. Second, he claims that ‘In early 1914 … the Admiralty decided to create a battlecruiser force in the Pacific, and was in the process of implementing the plan when the war broke out in August.’

Sumida clearly did not understand the complexities of British naval policy towards the Mediterranean before the war. There is an abundance of evidence to show that the First Lord hoped ultimately to

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Bell, ‘Sentiment vs Strategy’.
36 Sumida’s ‘Fisher’s Naval Revolution’.
defend British interests in this theatre in one of two ways: with a fleet of British and Dominion battleships capable of matching Germany’s ally Austria-Hungary, or by relying on cooperation with the French Navy, which would allow the withdrawal of British capital ships to home waters. The assignment of battle-cruisers to this region was a temporary measure to cover the period before Austria-Hungary and Italy completed their first dreadnoughts. It is even more difficult to understand Sumida’s assertion, for which no sources are provided, that the Admiralty intended to dispatch battlecruisers to the Pacific.37 In 1912–14 Churchill consistently sought to denude the Pacific of modern warships in order to bolster Britain’s strength in the North Sea, the opposite of what Sumida claims. Sumida himself may have realised that this declaration could not be sustained, since he does not repeat it in his later articles. However, he has continued to promote the idea that the ‘battlecruiser concept’ remained a factor in naval planning in 1914.

In two articles published in 2006, Sumida makes a substantially new argument: that prior to the outbreak of war ‘many senior naval officers of the Royal Navy’ had concluded ‘that flotilla defense of the British Isles was practicable, which in turn would free the surface fleet – albeit made up of battleships rather than battlecruisers – for deployment outside of home waters’.38 This suggests that Lambert’s flotilla defence concept should not be treated as the culmination of Fisher’s intended revolution, but as the first step in a more far-reaching strategy that also included Sumida’s ‘battlecruiser concept’. The underlying assumption here is that these two ideas were so closely intertwined that the implementation of one must inevitably mean the eventual adoption of the other. Even the decision to discontinue the construction of battlecruisers is not a problem, since the ‘battlecruiser concept’ can evidently now be applied to battleships if flotilla defence allowed them to be deployed outside home waters.

The defining feature of Fisher’s ‘naval revolution’ in Sumida’s work is therefore the combination of ‘flotilla defence’ and the ‘battlecruiser concept’. He maintains that these ideas were the core of Fisher’s radical programme in 1904-10; that this programme was eventually accepted in principle by Churchill and his senior advisers; and that both concepts were on the verge of being implemented in

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37 On the possible origins of this claim, and the lack of evidence to support it, see Bell, ‘Sentiment vs Strategy’.

1914, even though the decision to increase submarine production in 1914–15 at the expense of battleships might seem to privilege flotilla defence as the main goal of the 1914 ‘naval revolution’. In all the works discussed above, Sumida’s debt to Lambert is clear. The case for a Fisher-inspired revolution in 1914 was first articulated in print by Sumida, but it ultimately rested on Lambert’s work on submarines. To what extent, then, do Lambert’s arguments and evidence support Sumida’s interpretation?

**Lambert’s Naval Revolution**

Nicholas Lambert’s 1999 monograph *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution* provides significantly more detail on the development of flotilla defence and the realisation of Fisher’s ‘revolution’ in 1914. At first glance, the two historians seem to be agreed on essentials. In the book’s introduction, Lambert identifies the ‘battleship concept’ as a component of Fisher’s ‘radical vision’. As First Sea Lord, Fisher’s goal, according to Lambert, was ‘to reorganize the entire naval force structure so as better to exploit new weapon systems’:

Instead of continuing to build a fleet comprised largely of battleships and cruisers, he attempted to create a navy built around the battleship and the newly developed submarine. The battleship, of course, was to serve as the blue-water multi-role surface warship for imperial defense. Submarines were to form the cornerstone of Britain’s naval defense against invasion. To this end, Fisher developed a new theory of seapower – the concept of ‘flotilla defense’. This was a sea denial strategy intended to protect the British Isles from the possibility of invasion in the absence of the main fleet, thus restoring to the Royal Navy the ability to project naval force into distant waters...

There is clear agreement, therefore, as to the main outlines of Fisher’s policies in 1904–10. And Lambert, like Sumida, sees Churchill playing a key role in reviving Fisher’s strategic policies, which had been ‘perverted by his successors’. In 1913, according to Lambert, ‘the majority of Britain’s naval leaders had been persuaded that Fisher’s strategy theory was sound’. Having identified the ‘battleship concept’ as a part of the admiral’s intended ‘technological revolution’, he states that ‘Churchill’s administration ultimately decided to retrieve Fisher’s strategy’. It seems reasonable to infer

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from this that Lambert agreed with Sumida that battlecruisers and flotilla defence were both integral to the 1914 revolution.\footnote{Ibid., 10–11. This is how Keith Neilson interprets Lambert’s work in his chapter ‘Great Britain’, in Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig (eds), War Planning 1914 (Cambridge: CUP 2013), 190.}

\textit{Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution} also suggests that Fisher had a particularly strong influence on Churchill in late 1911, declaring that ‘Fisher managed to persuade his disciple [i.e. Churchill] ... [to embrace] the battlecruiser concept and the strategy of “flotilla defense”’.\footnote{Lambert, Fisher’s Naval Revolution, 245.}

However, this claim is directly supported by just a single document: a letter from Fisher to Churchill of 6 November 1911 in which the admiral describes the value of submarines as a means to prevent German raids (not, it should be noted, a German invasion) and of battlecruisers to destroy enemy destroyers, presumably in the North Sea. This undoubtedly provides a useful perspective on what Fisher believed at the time, but it does not point explicitly to either ‘flotilla defence’ or the ‘battlecruiser concept’ and, more importantly, cannot be treated as evidence that Churchill accepted and acted on these ideas.\footnote{Fisher to Churchill, 6 Nov. 1911, CHAR (Churchill Papers, Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge) 13/2/102-104.}

Churchill’s conversion to some form of ‘flotilla defence’ is supposedly confirmed by Fisher’s letter to Hankey, quoted above, and by Churchill’s later decision to place the flotilla craft on Britain’s east coast under the control of a single flag officer. Like Sumida, Lambert seems to assume that the case for flotilla defence can be made simply by demonstrating Churchill’s interest in submarines. However, the creation of an Admiral of Patrols does not in itself demonstrate anything about Churchill’s views on the viability of flotilla defence. And even if he was tempted by the idea, he soon lost interest. His report to the Prime Minister on the 1912 manoeuvres, for example, noted that ‘the forces at the disposal of the Admiral of Patrols will never be sufficient to enable a uniform guard to be maintained over the whole coast-line’.\footnote{Churchill, ‘Notes on the Manoeuvres’, ADM 116/3381; also Morgan-Owen, ‘The Invasion Question’, 173–5.}

Lambert’s assertion that Churchill was converted to the ‘battlecruiser concept’ around this time is similarly flawed. He states that Fisher ‘persuaded’ the First Lord ‘to cancel the battleships projected for the navy’s 1912/13 program and instead “plunge” for a new model battlecruiser.’\footnote{Lambert, Fisher’s Naval Revolution, 246.} But substituting battlecruisers for battleships, if that really was Churchill’s objective, is not the same as embracing the ‘battlecruiser concept’. Moreover, the sole source for all this is Churchill’s
letter of 10 November to Battenberg, which is primarily concerned with modifying the design of a single battlecruiser in the 1911/12 programme. Churchill may have briefly contemplated replacing three battleships of this programme with battlecruisers, but that is not explicitly stated in the letter. Lambert implies, moreover, that Fisher was the driving force behind this proposed change of policy. This may also be true, but the letter he cites from Fisher to Churchill on battlecruiser design was written after Churchill had raised the idea of a new design with Admiralty officials. In other words, Fisher’s recommendations for the new model battlecruiser may have been a response to Churchill’s plans, not their inspiration.45

Lambert notes one other attempt by Churchill in 1911 to alter the composition of the 1912/13 construction programme. Churchill briefly entertained the idea of retaining in home waters the battlecruiser Indomitable, which had previously been designated for transfer to the Pacific. This would have increased Britain’s capital ship strength in home waters, thereby allowing the Admiralty to drop one of the battleships projected in the 1912–13 Navy Estimates without diminishing Britain’s strength relative to Germany in the main theatre. The savings could then be used to fund additional flotilla craft. This proposal was rejected, however, by Churchill’s naval advisers. According to Lambert, the Sea Lords’ strong objections ‘quickly dampened Churchill’s enthusiasm for Fisher’s radical strategic ideas’. But he immediately notes that this was only a temporary setback, as the First Lord had ‘not entirely repudiate[d] his naval mentor’s theories’.46

While the two revisionists are seemingly in agreement up to this point, Lambert’s account of the process by which Churchill revived Fisher’s radical programme in 1913 differs from Sumida’s in important ways. In the first place, Lambert takes a different view of the influence of the Navy’s 1912 and 1913 manoeuvres. He correctly observes, for example, that Jellicoe’s ‘red’ force was able to claim a decisive victory in 1913, forcing naval leaders to question their ability to prevent a German raid without exposing the fleet to torpedo attack.47 Lambert’s treatment of Admiralty policy from mid-1912 onwards quietly pushes the concept of ‘flotilla defence’ into the background. What impressed naval leaders about Britain’s newest submarines in 1912 and 1913 was not, as Sumida implies, their success in disrupting enemy landings, which was largely non-existent, but their ability as part of the ‘red’ force to operate at a considerable distance from their own bases against ‘blue’ ports. This fuelled hopes that submarines might

45Ibid.
46Lambert, Fisher’s Naval Revolution, 248.
eventually be used to re-establish a close blockade of German ports. Unlike Sumida, Lambert acknowledges that Churchill and his advisers were interested in submarines not for coastal defence but for operations along the German North Sea coast. This was also Fisher’s position in 1913–14. A consensus was emerging at this time that the Navy would benefit from an immediate increase in submarine strength. As David Morgan-Owen has recently demonstrated, these plans bore no resemblance to ‘flotilla defence’. The observation of German ports by wireless-equipped submarines was seen as a means to ensure the early detection of a German raiding or invasion force, which would allow time for a British battlefleet to intercept it. \(^{48}\) In short, battleships, not coastal flotilla forces, were still regarded in 1914 as the best means to defeat an enemy attack on British shores.

Lambert is sufficiently aware of this shift in naval planning to avoid any explicit reference to flotilla defence in the final chapter of his book. Nor does he suggest that the ‘battlecruiser concept’ was any longer a factor in Churchill’s policies. However, he does not state explicitly that the ‘revolution’ of 1914 could not have been driven by Fisher’s agenda of 1904–10, as Sumida had argued a few years before and Lambert himself implied in his book’s introduction. Instead, Lambert constructs another ‘revolution’, this one supposedly driven by the Admiralty’s desire to obtain more submarines, if necessary at the expense of capital ship construction. Lambert notes that in 1912 Churchill considered reducing the number of battleships in the next year’s estimates in order to fund additional submarines. The First Lord revived this idea in late 1913 and was on the verge of implementing such a policy when war broke out in 1914. \(^{49}\) But Lambert does not explain here why a ‘substitution’ policy should be deemed revolutionary. Such a case would, indeed, be difficult to make. The strategy it was intended to facilitate was essentially a traditional one, with security achieved through a combination of close blockade and a superior battlefleet. Moreover, the Navy’s force structure would have changed only slightly in the short term, which was all that ‘substitution’ was meant to achieve. Nor was the reduced emphasis on battleships in 1914 a sharp departure from earlier policies. On the contrary, heavy expenditure on battleships during the dreadnought era was the anomaly. The rising unit cost of modern capital ships had meant the gradual

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\(^{49}\) Lambert states (‘On Standards’, 218) that he ‘found’ the documents about substitution, which is not entirely true. Robin Prior recorded in 1979 that Churchill’s draft memoir revealed his plan to replace two battleships in 1914 with smaller vessels. Robin Prior, ‘“The World Crisis” as History’, PhD dissertation, Univ. of Adelaide, 1979, 43–4.
redistribution of naval expenditure in ways that no longer suited the service’s strategic or operational requirements. A slight reduction in battleship construction in 1914 can therefore be seen as an attempt by the Admiralty to return to a more traditional balance in spending between battleships and other classes of warships, rather than a radical innovation.

Readers of Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution could therefore be forgiven for wondering why the adoption of a substitution policy is represented as the onset of a full-blown ‘revolution’, especially once Lambert rejects Sumida’s claims that substitution was intended to allow the adoption of flotilla defence and some version of the ‘battlecruiser concept’. Lambert only addressed this question directly in a 2012 article in War in History. We are now told explicitly that the revolution in 1914 had nothing to do with either flotilla defence or battlecruisers. Lambert also acknowledges that ‘the implementation of substitution did not mean that the Royal Navy no longer depended upon battleships. Nor, in and of itself, did it necessarily mean a change in force structure.’ The ‘truly revolutionary’ event in 1914, he maintains, was the adoption of a naval standard not ‘expressed solely in terms of battleships’, as ‘all previously announced standards had been’. This substantially new argument moves the focus from Fisher’s radical programme of earlier years to Lambert’s case that substitution was inextricably linked to a revision of Britain’s existing naval standard. The problems with this formulation have been addressed at length elsewhere, and only a summary is required here. In making his case for a revolutionary change in policy, Lambert relies on a simplistic and misleading description of British naval standards. These may have traditionally been couched solely in terms of capital ships, but this does not mean, as Lambert insists, that ‘only battleships mattered’. Naval leaders and informed political leaders always understood that other classes of warship also ‘mattered’, otherwise they would not have spent vast sums building them year after year. In early 1914, Churchill informed Parliament that the Admiralty had standards for every class of warship. The premise underlying Lambert’s whole argument is flawed.

There are also good reasons to doubt that in mid-1914 Britain actually had abandoned a construction standard that regulated capital ship strength. To begin with, the decision was not the Admiralty’s to make. Lambert has argued that a naval standard had to be announced in Parliament to have legitimacy, so it is difficult to see how, in the

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51 Ibid., 239.
52 Bell, ‘On Standards and Scholarship’.
53 Ibid.
absence of any such announcement in 1914, Lambert can claim that Britain had abandoned its existing standard. He evidently assumes that the Admiralty could unilaterally make such a change without even securing Cabinet approval. Since this idea had not been raised in Cabinet, much less approved there or announced to Parliament, Britain could not have formally adopted a new standard. It is also unlikely that Churchill and the Admiralty proposed to do so.

Lambert’s argument to the contrary is based almost entirely on an unpublished draft chapter of Churchill’s *The World Crisis*, a draft written and discarded in the early 1920s. The former First Lord revealed there that he contemplated treating the cancelled battleships of the 1914 programme ‘not as Capital Ships but as units of power’. The implication of this, according to Lambert, is that Britain’s 60 per cent standard relative to Germany in capital ships would be transformed into a new standard measured in terms of battleships and submarines. This conclusion rests on several mistaken assumptions. The first is that Britain possessed just a single naval standard, one that regulated the construction of battleships. In fact, after 1912 Britain also maintained two Cabinet-sanctioned ‘standards’ governing the distribution of capital ships. These stipulated 50 per cent superiority over Germany in the North Sea, and equality with Austria-Hungary in the Mediterranean. By assuming that any reference to standards related to the construction standard, Lambert fails to appreciate that Churchill and his advisers might have been discussing the modification or abandonment of the Mediterranean ‘one power standard’. The failure of Canada to provide battleships for this theatre, along with increases in the dreadnought programmes of Austria-Hungary and Italy at this time, meant that in early 1914 the British government was probably on the verge of scrapping the Mediterranean capital ship standard that had been adopted, against Churchill’s advice, in the summer of 1912.

Lambert consistently misreads or ignores the evidence that the ‘units of power’ formulation in Churchill’s memoirs was developed to deflect criticism from his plans to reduce capital ship strength in that subsidiary theatre, and to rely on British flotilla craft and the French Navy to protect British interests there. In the process, Lambert also misses or disregards clear signs that Churchill was still committed to maintaining a battleship standard. Churchill noted in the draft memoirs that he ‘had not been able to arrive at any exact standard to govern the change’ in the 1914 construction programmes suggests that he had not reached any final decision. There is clear contemporary evidence, moreover, that Churchill did not intend to abandon a battleship standard. Two options were actively under consideration at the Admiralty in 1914: the

54 CHAR 8/61.
reversion to a two-power battleship standard measured against Germany and France, and a revised battleship standard that played down numbers and emphasised instead qualitative factors, especially the relative weight of the rival fleets’ broadsides. Lambert is either unaware of these discussions, or chooses to ignore them. In light of this evidence, it seems likely that Churchill’s intention in July 1914 was to devise a plausible new interpretation of the existing standards in order to give the Admiralty greater flexibility in its current building programme.

Conclusion

A forensic examination of the evidence for a Fisher-inspired revolution-by-proxy in 1914 reveals serious flaws in the revisionists’ research and methodology. Jon Sumida’s argument that Churchill accepted Fisher’s radical programme in 1911 and then implemented it in 1913–14 is ultimately based on the misleading or erroneous interpretation of just a handful of documents. This scanty evidence is backed by reference to more extensive scholarship on the subject by Nicholas Lambert, but Lambert’s early published work offers little support for Sumida’s claims that the 1914 revolution was linked to Fisher’s plans for flotilla defence and the ‘battlecruiser concept’, and his later work explicitly rejects this proposition. Lambert’s argument that Churchill accepted and briefly tried to implement Fisher’s original programme in 1911 is based on similar misreading of a small body of archival evidence. His claim that the substitution policy of 1914 signalled the abandonment of Britain’s traditional battleship standard is also faulty. Lambert systematically misreads the documents cited in support of his argument, and either ignores or dismisses the larger body of evidence pointing in different directions. Most importantly, his argument rests on the dubious premise that a change in Britain’s naval standard is sufficient grounds to proclaim a ‘naval revolution’ even though the Navy’s war plans and force structure were only being modified, not radically overhauled, in light of evolving strategic policies and operational requirements.

These conclusions have significant ramifications for the revisionist interpretation of the Royal Navy. The cutting-edge methodologies and consummate archival research so often claimed by the revisionists have not, after all, produced intrinsically superior results. This is not to suggest that there is no merit in any of their work, or that Marder’s earlier scholarship is flawless. From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow remains an impressive feat of scholarship, but naval historians, both revisionist and post-revisionist, are right to focus on moving the field forward. Lambert, Sumida and their supporters assert that the revisionists have offered a viable new paradigm to replace Marder’s
‘orthodox’ interpretation, an interpretation that is not widely perceived as being irretrievably broken. As Kuhn has observed, it is not uncommon for rival paradigms to exist side-by-side until one eventually triumphs over the other and a ‘paradigm shift’ finally occurs. The frequent need for the revisionists to reassert the superiority of their model suggests that they are aware that such a shift has still not happened. They appear confident that it will, but after 20 years their running battle with Marder seems increasingly dated and unproductive. With a growing number of scholars challenging the conclusions of both Marder and the revisionists, the field is clearly moving on. Unfortunately, the revisionists seem unwilling to entertain the idea that non-revisionist historians might also have benefited from sophisticated methodologies and extensive archival research. It would be unwise to assume that the historiography of the Royal Navy will follow the linear, almost Whiggish, progression the revisionists seem to favour, in which the bold, dynamic new scholars inevitably topple their outmoded and discredited predecessors. This does not always happen: sometimes it is the new paradigm that cannot withstand rigorous scrutiny and has to be abandoned.

Notes on Contributor

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