

*A Report on the First Annual Alan Villiers Memorial Lecture*

**‘Naval Power and the World Question:  
geopolitics, technology and the rise of the West’**

**by Professor Jeremy Black**

(29 September 2010 at St Edmund Hall)

Report by **Justin Reay** *FSA*

(*St. Bede's Hall, Oxford*)

It is rare that we have the opportunity to hear a distinguished historian give an overview of historical development in the early modern period which also resonates with important political decision-making today. Jeremy's Black inaugural lecture in the Alan Villiers Memorial series<sup>1</sup> was just such a moment.

The surface of our world is largely covered with water, and the vast proportion of goods travel by sea. Although humans are land-based, and we can now travel by aircraft, the sea is central to our wealth creation and distribution. Ship-borne trade thrives and Britain in particular is still a maritime economy, the world's leader in maritime finance and insurance with 15,000 people employed in the UK in a sector turning over £2 billion a year, and we are dependant on maritime transport for over 95 per cent of our foreign trade by weight, 75 per cent by value. The British are among the *gens-de-mer* of the developed world, with the Dutch, Bretons, Greeks, Portuguese, Japanese and the western Scandinavians, and naval power

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<sup>1</sup> The *Alan Villiers Memorial Lectures* commemorates Captain Alan Villiers, Master Mariner, author, television programme maker, and photographer. This new series of annual lectures on nautical, maritime or naval history topics, is organised by the Society for Nautical Research, publisher of the quarterly journal *The Mariner's Mirror*; the Royal Naval officer's journal *The Naval Review*, and the Britannia Naval Research Association, an Oxford-based group engaged in original research across the range of naval history. In 2011 the *Alan Villiers Memorial Lecture* will take place on 28 September, at St Edmund Hall, Oxford. Rear Admiral James Goldrick, of the Royal Australian Navy, will be keynote speaker. Admiral Goldrick is an author and naval historian, president of the Australian Naval Institute and Professorial Fellow of the Centre for Maritime Policy, University of Wollongong. More information is available from the AVML administrator at: [avmlpurser@ntlworld.com](mailto:avmlpurser@ntlworld.com)

originally enabled and defended our maritime economy, creating the vast British Empire – a true and possibly unique thalassocracy – and the underpinning of our cultural strength and of our prosperity. Any worthwhile analysis of the historical development of naval power has relevance to modern policy making.

Jeremy Black, Professor of History at the University of Exeter, is a prolifically-published historian whose works on the military and political history of the early modern and modern eras will be familiar to many of us. He could have treated his theme – ‘Naval Power and the World Question: geopolitics, technology and the rise of the West’ – with just a pedestrian, narrow outline of the sea-borne steps taken by European states towards global dominance implicit in his sub-title. However, Black chose to deal with the big issue, and true to form his lecture was a *tour de force* of wide thinking supported by a plethora of detail, dynamically expressed and sometimes controversial. But was it relevant?

For many centuries maritime growth in the western hemisphere was restricted to coastal areas, often estuarine, but even with the development in Europe of ocean-going vessels and better navigation, western maritime exploration lagged behind that of the east. Black, developing upon the opening pages of one of his most recent books, *Naval Power* (2009), reminded us that the states of Asia had built and deployed large and effective naval forces long before any European states. The Southern Song empire in China, perhaps the most adventurous maritime power, developed sea-borne trade with the ports and tidal river cities of south-east Asia and across the Indian Ocean, with annual voyages trading wrought iron, porcelain, silk and other textiles to the Persian Gulf as far as Mesopotamia. The Ming dynasty possessed a large fleet of immense merchant junks protected by warships, armed as early as 1350 with effective gunpowder-fired cannon. In the opening decades of the fifteenth century – before European Atlantic states made their first tentative oceanic voyages over the horizon from their shoreline – China was master of the northern Pacific as far as Indonesia, its predatory fleet under the Muslim admiral Zheng He crossing the Indian Ocean following trade routes established under the Song empire to Africa, invaded Sri Lanka, and possibly entered the Southern Ocean.

When the first European states, Portugal and Spain, entered the waters of the eastern hemisphere in the late fifteenth century, the contact could have led to violent confrontation at sea. It did not. Black mentions the reasons for this in his recent useful overview of global conflict *War, a Short History* (2009) and gives a more detailed background to it in the first

chapter of *Naval Power*, and he expanded upon it in his talk to his Oxford audience of some 60 graduate and undergraduate students, retired and serving naval personnel, and professional and amateur naval historians.

There are several strands in the analysis of history, all relevant to our understanding of the development of maritime – and thus economic – power during the period when the western states began to achieve maritime reach leading to global dominance. The first strand is the ‘world question’, a state’s will to expand beyond its immediate centre of influence, which saw for example Portugal creating a littoral empire in the southern Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The second is technological power, in which the development of technical capability creates opportunities; but this could also lead to limitations, for example, the deeper draught of European round-hulled ships finding difficulty negotiating the shallow coastal waters of west Africa and east Asia, where local shallow-draught galleys and junks were more effective. The third strand is technological determinism (‘technology determines history’, as Raymond Williams puts it), where technological innovation enables a state to enforce its political power, as with the Korean armoured ‘turtle’ ships defeating a superior Japanese invasion force.

The naval history of Asian and south-east Asian states is not well known to Eurocentric and western history studies partly because the eastern states such as China and Japan did not have the same political will or strategic need to expand beyond their immediate maritime boundaries. The Ming for instance encountered criticism at home for wasting money on building ocean-going junks, and within a few years of their explorations westwards withdrew their navies and embargoed international trading for all but essential goods, turning their political and military attention inwards. Thus their early technological superiority at sea did not come into conflict with western navies until much later in the evolution of European naval capability. It was not until the 1660s, when China invaded Taiwan to expel Dutch and Spanish traders that such encounters began to happen in earnest, when the better sea-handling characteristics of Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and, much later, English square-rigged, deep-draught and keeled vessels and the superior firepower enabled by corned gunpowder and broadside-firing tactics gave western ships the edge. The response of the Asian states to growing western maritime power was to ignore it due, as Black put it, to a different set of priorities. It is this set of priorities which is at the heart of the question of sea-power today.

As Black reminded us, the inward-looking orientation of the largest Asian states formed Halford J. Mackinder's hypothesis of the differing priorities held by continental ('Heartland') states and by maritime ('Rimland') states, inhibiting major clashes between them until the nineteenth century when long-range land transport became practical, later followed by the military possibilities of long-range, large-scale air transport enabling *blitzkrieg* invasion. At the time he propounded his theory, Mackinder thought the evolution of land transport would allow the Asiatic continental states to rise, and that sea-power was redundant. However, we are an oceanic planet and the bulk of trade goods continues to flow by sea. Continental powers depend as much on the sea for economic prosperity as do maritime states and this dependence grows as their industrial economies expand and their extra-mural supplies and markets with it. Mackinder's hypothesis collided with Alfred Thayer Mahan's view that global power demanded maritime reach. In the modern world we have seen the reality that even great continental powers cannot turn their back on the sea. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was financed by sea-trade and built a modern navy; Germany with its short coastline built a large merchant fleet trading across the globe and a navy intended to force a world-wide empire to compete with Great Britain; Czarist Russia, a relatively minor naval power in the age of sail, developed a powerful navy once steam-power enabled large-ship movement in their difficult, often confined waters, and the immense fishing, whaling and merchant fleets of the USSR were backed by an impressive navy which wielded strategic might; the United States virtually created its mercantile exports globally on the back of a rapidly enlarged blue-water navy after the Civil War; and China, a sleeping tiger for 500 years, is now becoming the world's merchant carrier – it is no coincidence that the powerhouse of Chinese trade and the most potent symbols of its burgeoning prosperity lie along its coastline. The Rimland states are thus at risk of losing their pre-eminence in maritime trade.

The lesson for the future from Black's lecture is that maritime trade matters greatly to the modern global economy and thus we see that China, the rapidly emerging economic power, is developing a coherent maritime geo-policy for the first time in half a millennium; it is expanding its blue-water navy which in Professor Black's opinion will become paramount in the 21st century, to the concern of all nations around the Pacific rim and beyond.

Black – addressing a significant number of senior Royal Navy officers and naval historians – was uncharacteristically hesitant to articulate the difficult question which lay at the heart of his talk, 'What is a navy for?' This central issue, a concern exercising all states since

armed ships first entered the sea, was dealt with more robustly by Professor Geoffrey Till of King's College London in a recent guest article in the *US Naval War College Review*, in which he stated that the primary concern of an armed maritime force is to protect trade; his secondary purposes include fighting wars, especially mounting what he terms 'distant expeditions', and preventing or deterring third-party conflict at sea.<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me that naval power fulfils many other legitimate concerns of a modern democratic state, such as: deterring attack, both strategic (e.g. with submarine-borne missiles poised against unilateral nuclear attack – a proven deterrent if now fashionably unpopular), and tactical (defence or deterrence against terrorist attack on coastal assets such as oil rigs or mercantile seaports); policing actions against piracy, people trafficking, illicit drugs trafficking, customs evasion and oceanic environmental pollution; and a nation which prides itself as a civilised society with compassion for others in need, would also want to use its navy to provide quick response specialist skills and heavy-lift assistance to victims of natural disasters, both for maritime littoral communities and as ship-borne airlift support for the victims of inland disasters.

All this demands financial resourcing. Being highly-technical and requiring large-scale industrial and technological input and skilled specialist personnel, navies are expensive, as the Ming dynasty found to their detriment. If the need to maintain a naval presence is important, defending a nation's assets and maintaining the free global passage of economically vital trade, it will also cost money. Navies have to be designed and trained to fight – in ship-to-ship or ship-to-air actions at sea, as amphibious launch and relief in littoral attack, as power-projection ashore, as logistical heavy-lift support for land war, and for over-the-horizon carrier-borne air support – but ultimately their purpose is the protection of a state's way of life against external threat. For maritime states, armies and air forces cannot do that.

However, while avoiding this key issue in his lecture Black did remind us that the role of choice is important – states make choices about the kind of society they wish to be and how to resource that. What he did not say, but which is germane to the debate, is that Britain does not have a choice. We are not a continental nation, although allied financially, commercially, and increasingly politically and militarily with our continental neighbours. We are *gens-de-mer*, a

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Till, 'New Directions in Maritime Strategy? Implications for the U.S. Navy', *US Naval War College Review* (Autumn 2007), pp. 29–43.

maritime nation on an oceanic planet, with experience and expertise in sea-going trade, if not now an inherently maritime culture.

In drawing the threads of his talk together, Black stated that we need to learn from history, and not just our own. We should recognise that the United Kingdom still has a world-class presence in the maritime economy, both in goods and in services, and still has a high-level naval capability, and that we should maintain that disparate set of expertise to leverage our advantages if we are to compete and maintain our level of prosperity.

In a lively question session, Professor Black was asked to characterise the current debate into the naval aspects of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR), which was due to be announced a few days later. He reiterated his point about the necessity of leveraging advantage. Britain as an economy is good at managing and dependant upon coastal resources such as undersea oil and gas, and has an extensive maritime trade; that demands a strong maritime presence and thus an effective naval capability. He thought that the SDR would be confused by the current land-theatre war in Afghanistan – an unusual, short-term theatre in British military history in being so far from sea-borne logistical support; this would lead to an under-commitment to naval resources which will adversely affect our logistical and financial maritime market expertise and reduce our naval capability, from both of which our comparative global economic advantage arises. While apparently a temporary move away from our long-held maritime interests, the effects would be permanent and detrimental to our wellbeing.

A question which Black's talk might well have raised remained unasked: is our maritime and naval history relevant to Britain in the modern world, or is it just romantic, out-dated fodder for fiction? My own view, as a former naval officer, a business executive and now an academic historian, is that the history-as-heritage industry has confused the clear view we should have of the importance of a strong maritime base to our economy. It has become fashionable to dismiss advocates of a strong navy as crusty admirals harking back to a golden era that never existed, dusty antiquaries arguing about the minutiae of ship's rigging in the age of sail, or half-grownup little boys endlessly re-enacting the battle of Trafalgar. The reality is that history has lessons which we must learn, and the evolution of global maritime power driving dynamic economies in the West was neither the first, nor the most important such event in world history, nor will it be the last.