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On the Rise of the Materialists and the Decline of Naval Thought in the RCN

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Credit: Irving Shipbuilding

The first **Harry DeWolf**-class Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ship is escorted back to Irving Shipbuilding after being launched via submersible barge in Bedford Basin, 15 September 2018.

The launch of the lead Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ship (AOPS) on 15 September 2018 came with much fanfare.¹ As the first class of vessels designed specifically for the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) to operate in the North since the 1950s, the AOPS project is said to be a symbol of innovative thought, fruit of a deliberate reflection on the particular circumstances of Canada as a 21st century maritime state. In another sense, it is anything but. The navy did not call for this capability, it originated with the 2005 election platform of then-Opposition leader Stephen Harper.² The last innovation in terms of ships which can be attributed directly to naval planners is the *Kingston*-class Maritime Coastal Defence Vessel (MCDV), the first of which was launched in 1995.³

The MCDVs commenced operations as the study of maritime affairs reached a pinnacle in Canada – from Fred Crickard and Peter Haydon’s *Why Canada Needs Maritime Forces* (1994) to *Canadian Gunboat Diplomacy: The Canadian Navy and Foreign Policy* published by the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies at Dalhousie University in 2000, and the navy’s own *Leadmark: The Navy’s Strategy for 2020*.⁴ These milestones punctuated a remarkable growth through the 1990s in the study of maritime affairs inside the RCN and among the civilian academic community. Regrettably, this period was followed by

a steady attrition of the intellectual capital dedicated to these matters. The challenge of delivering the future fleet has since consumed the RCN leadership, which is now focused on material acquisition and the management of limited resources, a trend highlighted in the navy’s latest strategic plan.⁵

This article cautions that such single-mindedness may also strike an irreversible blow to the RCN’s capacity to generate independent and innovative naval thought in the coming decades. This is not to say that Canadian Admirals deliberately set out to undermine the institutions and processes which gave rise to this unprecedented period of intellectual reflection. A number of factors – some within the RCN’s grasp, others well beyond – contributed to the gradual starvation of that movement. This article will review the rise of maritime studies in Canada and its precipitous fall, raising the prospect of a navy narrowly committed to delivering the future fleet in a context disturbingly void of intellectual reflection. But first an introduction to contrasting schools of thought is warranted.

Materialists vs. The Intellectual School

In the latter half of the 19th century there was a dramatic ‘industrialisation’ at sea as navies transitioned from the age of sail to the steam era. Controversy soon followed, particularly in the Royal Navy (RN), as voices claimed



Credit: Corporal Martin Roy, Formation Imaging Services

The Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels HMCS *Moncton* and HMCS *Summerside* tie up at Sydney Marine Terminal, Nova Scotia, during Exercise *Frontier Sentinel* in May 2012.

that new technologies made Nelsonian teachings irrelevant. The debate led to a divide between ‘materialists’ who were pursuing victory through technological superiority, and partisans of the historical school who were concerned that the RN had “managed to forget almost entirely the principles on which its great victories in the early nineteenth century had rested.”⁶ The dispute was never truly resolved and the influence of the schools of thought ebbed and flowed through successive ‘revolutions in military affairs’ in the RN and that of the other major sea powers.⁷

RCN Admirals, by and large, left higher professional education and intellectual reflection to their adopted mentors, first the RN and then the US Navy after the Second World War.⁸ Most approached their task in strictly materialist terms. Based on the resources available at the time, what fleet mix would make the best contribution to the naval strategy formulated by larger powers within a context of collective defence, whether the British Empire until 1939, the Allied war effort in 1939-1945, and NATO thereafter? Content until the 1980s to provide the means to meet alliance needs, Canadian Admirals saw this approach tested severely by the uncertainties of the post-Cold War era, necessitating unprecedented reflection on the fundamentals of sea power.

Although its proponents did not use that term, one can draw parallels between those RCN officers developing an interest beyond the material factor in the wake of the Cold War and earlier pillars of the British historical school. For the purpose of this article, though, *intellectual* school may better describe the Canadian context. Naval figures and academics concerned with maritime affairs did not necessarily preach history as the sole vessel of wisdom but rather affirmed that technology and material factors were not enough “to help understand the present and plan for the future.”⁹ In other words, an intellectual approach was necessary to conciliate policy, strategy, tactics and equipment to avoid “a mismatch between a possibly prevailing

set of military assumptions and Canada’s wider domestic and international security needs.”¹⁰

Rise of the Intellectual School

Admittedly, some champions of the new intellectualism did not take up that cause by choice but through desperation. Political leaders sought to reap a large peace dividend after the Berlin Wall fell, forcing the RCN into a troubling high-wire act. On the one hand, the fleet had achieved an exceptional level of material readiness in the early 1990s with the ongoing delivery of 12 *Halifax*-class frigates, the recent modernisation of the four *Iroquois*-class destroyers, the upgrade of three *Oberon* submarines in the mid-1980s, initial plans for an Afloat Logistics Support Concept (ALSC) as a replacement for three aging replenishment vessels, and the construction of the *Kingston*-class MCDVs. On the other hand, naval planners would soon face a challenge as the government of Jean Chrétien, which was elected in 1993, set about implementing deep budget cuts to fight the crippling national deficit.

This dramatic change in geopolitical and budgetary circumstances caught naval staff flat-footed. By the end of the Cold War, Western military leaders were well-practiced in the methodology of threat-based planning



Credit: Walter E. Frost via Vancouver Archives

Showing the typical profile of the Cold War RCN surface fleet, HMCS *Columbia* enters Vancouver on 11 July 1970.



Persian Gulf - Enroute, a painting by Richard Rudnicki, depicts HMC Ships *Athabaskan*, *Terra Nova* and *Protecteur* sailing towards the Persian Gulf in 1991 – a fleet similar to what could be seen at the height of the Cold War.

– i.e., determining what means one needs to face a specific threat, in this case the Warsaw Pact.¹¹ They also used NATO force goals – agreed commitments of national forces to the alliance – to justify their budget and equipment plans. Force goals were a particularly potent tool for the RCN to illustrate how the proposed fleet mix met the demands of collective defence since NATO specifically called for Canada to provide autonomous task groups to fight Soviet submarines in the Atlantic.¹² But politicians and civil servants demanded that Canadian military requirements be expressed and justified in national terms in the post-Cold War era. Neither threat-based planning in a world where the threat had seemingly vanished nor force goals promulgated by an alliance struggling for a *raison d'être* would suffice.

RCN Admirals grasped the urgency of shaping an effective narrative regarding Canadian naval affairs, especially as they were yet to obtain funding for more major acquisitions including: new helicopters; the next generation of submarines; and the ALSC (eventually relabelled the Joint Support Ship). In this concern, they were not alone. A small but increasingly vibrant academic community dedicated to maritime affairs also took it upon itself to explain to government and the general public why Canada still needed a navy in the new world disorder. Their written submissions and speaking appearances shaped the maritime dimension of the 1994 Defence White Paper, with the navy emerging among the three services “the most unscathed.”¹³

The need to explain military requirements in national terms was not the sole reason behind the urge for intellectualisation then overtaking the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). The Somalia affair started as an army problem – leading to the disbandment of the Airborne Regiment in 1995 – but the inquiry which followed also identified enduring systemic issues affecting all three services. They

included the lack of higher schooling among the officer corps as well as a lackadaisical approach to professional military education, leaving senior leaders ill-prepared for the circumstances of the post-Cold War era.¹⁴ In a pivotal 1997 report, Defence Minister Douglas Young proposed sweeping reforms to training and education which were quickly implemented across the CAF.¹⁵ A decade later, military analyst David Bercuson could draw the following conclusion:

Not just the army, but the entire Canadian Forces at first *crawled*, then *wandered*, then *stumbled*, but eventually began to march forward with determination to a new professionalism rooted in the history and values of Canadian society, based upon a fighting ethos, with a democratic ethic and with one of the best-educated officer corps of any armed forces anywhere.¹⁶ (Emphasis in the original.)

Return of the Materialists

By the early 2000s, the RCN had achieved a balanced approach to the profession. Senior officers and non-commissioned members had outgrown the technical challenges inherent to introducing new vessels and technologies in the 1990s, and achieved tactical excellence at sea during repeated operational deployments at home and abroad. They willingly sought advanced education and continued professional development without falling into the careerism and managerial mantra decried during the later decades of the Cold War. The 2001 *Leadmark*, updated in 2005, provided the Canadian rationale for the use of sea power in support of unique national requirements.¹⁷ Officers and sailors grew increasingly comfortable operating with the other services in a joint environment as well as with partners and allies overseas. They could publish their views in *Canadian Military Journal* (launched in 2000) and *Canadian Naval Review* (launched in 2005). That same year, however, a decision made far inland in Toronto boded ill for this intellectualisation trend.

The Canadian Forces College (CFC) was then, and remains today, the only establishment tasked to deliver professional military education to senior CAF officers (majors/lieutenant-commanders and above). One core deliverable was the Command and Staff Course (now known as the Joint Command and Staff Programme). Its curriculum included one term dedicated to service-specific education. Unlike the three other joint terms, in that two-month period all candidates were divided into single service syndicates dedicated to the study of service doctrine as well as environment-specific issues at the operational and strategic levels.¹⁸ However, CAF leadership accepted CFC's proposal in 2005 to eliminate the 'service term' as



Credit: Canadian Forces College

Although the Canadian Forces College in Toronto now provides courses for all services, it was originally used only by the Royal Canadian Air Force.

it did not conform to the college’s mandate of delivering *joint* military education.¹⁹ The decision made sense from that perspective and seemed to cause little controversy among the three services. The army appeared satisfied to rely on its Doctrine and Training Centre to “contribute to land warfare intellectual development,” while the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) assigned a similar mandate to the School of Aerospace Studies and the Aerospace Warfare Centre.²⁰

The Royal Canadian Navy, however, did not have a similar institution. To paraphrase Allan English’s discussion of the RCAF, the RCN did not have a place to study the means “to achieve professional [sea] power mastery, which consists of an expert comprehension of [sea] power, the ability to apply that understanding effectively as well as the ability to contemplate and debate [sea] power in terms of future force structure.”²¹ To this day, the RCN’s training establishments and the Canadian Forces Maritime Warfare Centre (CFMWC) remain centres of excellence at the tactical level, with the latter tasked to “develop and deliver maritime tactics and operational manoeuvre doctrine in support of Canada’s maritime forces.”²² This leaves higher headquarters responsible for the navy’s institutional and intellectual development, with the Director General of Naval Force Development (DGNFD) assigned – among a wide range of competing tasks – the development of naval strategy, concepts and doctrine. Such arrangements appear to have generated little reflection on the Canadian dimension of sea power, at least in the public domain, with the notable exception of ‘the son of *Leadmark*’ in 2017.²³

This absence of reflection is mirrored in the scarcity of submissions by serving officers in professional publications, including *Canadian Naval Review*, which is particularly dispiriting as one of *CNR*’s goals is to encourage such

writings. This may be attributed in part to the gradual elimination of nearly all officer positions dealing with questions of sea power, across the CAF, beyond the small circle employed behind closed doors at DGNFD. The cancellation of the service term at CFC was accompanied by the elimination of the college’s Maritime Studies Programme. RCN officers still serve on staff but they are not employed in posts dedicated to naval issues.²⁴ The navy also elected to abandon its defence fellowship at Dalhousie University in 2015, confirming the low priority accorded by the RCN’s leadership to the intellectual factor.²⁵

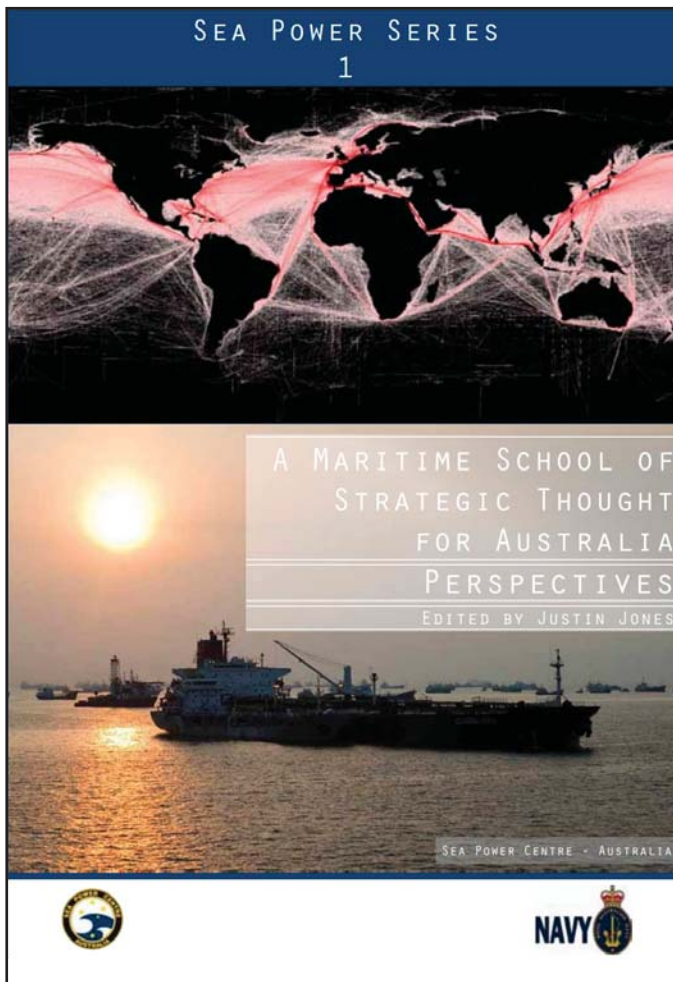
An Irreversible Decline?

This accretion of successive but uncoordinated decisions leaves the RCN ill-equipped to reflect upon the evolving fundamentals of sea power in the 21st century, let alone generate original thought of the kind germinating in dynamic institutions found among partner navies, such as the Sea Power Centre - Australia. A few dedicated civilian academics continue researching and writing about naval affairs, only by their own choice though. The RCN itself has seemingly given up the ability to forge independent and innovative naval thought adapted to Canada’s unique circumstances, as well as shaping education for its senior officers and the non-commissioned corps beyond the tactical level. One cannot doubt the importance of fleet re-capitalisation in the coming decades. However, pursuing



Credit: Royal Canadian Navy

The Royal Canadian Navy’s doctrinal document, *Leadmark 2050*, was made available with little fanfare in 2016.



The Sea Power Centre – Australia had its roots in the early 1990s as an autonomous research centre within the Royal Australian Navy, and has produced numerous papers in different categories, such as the Sea Power Series.

this materialist effort in a void of intellectual reflection presents risks that warrant due consideration in the immediate term.

Simply reverting to past decisions will not provide adequate solutions for the future as the RCN would be ill-advised to ‘contract out’ its intellectual effort to institutions beyond its control. Perhaps the mandates of existing establishments – CFMWC in Halifax or the Naval Officer Training Centre in Esquimalt – could be expanded and resources allocated to stand up a small faculty dedicated to the study and teaching of sea power in the Canadian context. Exploring these options in greater detail, as well as more innovative approaches such as partnering with Canadian universities or naval centres overseas, would necessitate a much longer article. Nevertheless, one hopes that this short commentary may launch a fuller reflection on the decline of naval thought in the RCN before the trend becomes irreversible. 🍷

Notes

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