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Military Spectacle in Interwar Britain: Militarism, Propaganda, and the Shadows of World

War

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in History

by

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September 2020

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ABSTRACT

Military Spectacle in Interwar Britain: Militarism, Propaganda, and the Shadows of World
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by

Joshua C. Rocha

This dissertation examines major military displays in interwar Britain. Military displays include military parades, tattoos, air shows, reviews, pageants, navy weeks, and other derivations. I use evidence from archives, newspapers, and published sources to analyze their production and reception. The Royal Navy, the British Army, and the Royal Air Force succeeded in creating extraordinarily popular shows, but these shows did little to promote a grounded understanding of each service's role in past or future wars. The Royal Navy and the British Army, in particular, struggled to make ships or soldiers look less like interesting symbols of the past and more like vital components of Britain's defense in the next war. Airplanes, however, benefited from being a relatively new technology upon which hopes and fears could be projected. In addition, air power, which represented the “totalizing” nature of modern war by further eliminating distinctions between civilians and combatants, benefited from the simultaneous decline of “civilianism” in the interwar period. The decline of “civilianism” coincided with the broader decline of traditional liberalism that only

accelerated after the Great War. Long associated with Britain's liberal past, the Royal Navy confronted a less congenial environment when it reasserted its claim as the nation's "Senior Service." The RAF's displays at Hendon and Empire Air Day benefited from, and contributed to, the "air-mindedness" of the British public and an exaggerated sense of air power's transformative nature. These aerial displays failed, however, to teach the public about official RAF doctrine, which centered on a counter-offensive bombing strategy. The military displays of the era served as important sites of discourse and their reception indicates a robust, open political culture. Still, they ultimately must be counted among the most important sources of misinformation during the interwar period regarding Britain's national defense.

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Introduction

My wife and I took a long-delayed honeymoon to France and Switzerland in 2019. With the clouds lifting from the mountains after a rainy night, we toured the Hofkirche St. Leodegar on a late May morning in the almost impossibly picturesque Swiss city of Lucerne. St. Leodegar was built in the seventeenth century, but a monastery first rose on the site in the eighth century. As we ambled through the peaceful adjoining gardens, passing the time looking for the oldest gravestone, a sudden roar jolted us from our morning idyll. A Swiss Air Force F/A-18 Hornet fighter jet accelerated through the sky above us. For the next fifteen minutes or so, the jet performed impressive maneuvers at low altitude above the city. A lifelong aviation enthusiast, I found my attention immediately drawn from the Hofkirche to the Hornet. To my surprise, my churchyard companions were equally transfixed. The lone F/A-18 was only a taste of what came later, when the Patrouille Suisse aerobatic team put on an even more impressive show above the city. By flying behind Mt. Pilatus, the mountain that towers over Lucerne, and exploiting the closed-in nature of the city, the six-plane team produced a bewildering manipulation of sound. Walking across the Reussbrücke, which links one side of the city to the other, we were surrounded by onlookers doing their best to capture the air show on their cellphones. In that moment, I was struck by the power of the airplane to overwhelm the senses. Here we were, surrounded by tourists who presumably came to Lucerne to take in the lake, the mountains, and the charm of a traditional Swiss city, yet all eyes looked skyward. More than a century after the invention of flight, the airplane still captivates onlookers. Trained by our familiarity with airliners, we expect airplanes to fly in straight lines with their muffled engines. The astounding volume of noise produced by a

military aircraft like the F/A-18 quickly reminds us of the power and dynamism of flight.

The Swiss airshow evoked my subject: military displays in interwar Britain. Military displays include military parades, air shows, reviews, pageants, navy weeks, and other derivations. The contrast between the loud, dynamic modernity of the airplane and the traditional beauty of Switzerland compares to the relationship between the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy during the interwar period. No one confused the Royal Navy's warships for the bucolic Swiss countryside, but the latest warship no longer represented the cutting-edge of military technology as it had in decades past. The warship had become partially domesticated and served as a symbol of Britain's past glories as much as a symbol of her future might. Perhaps many onlookers in Lucerne were bothered by the aerial maneuvers, thinking they had come to hear cowbells and yodeling rather than jet engines. Perhaps the alpine views persist in their memories rather than the close formation flying. Nearly all looked skyward nevertheless. Much of the same could be said for military displays during the interwar period, when flying represented a technological marvel and a portent of things to come. Various technologies shared the stage at these displays, but aircraft drew the most attention.

The interwar period featured the proliferation of entirely new military displays while those with pre-war roots saw their popularity skyrocket. These events annually drew crowds of hundreds of thousands. Navy Week, the RAF Display at Hendon, and the Aldershot Tattoo became defining events of the summer season, rivaling in appeal and press coverage the

Royal Ascot and the Championships at Wimbledon¹ Military displays entertained an increasingly mobile and leisured population with martial pomp, historical set-pieces, live music, and a close-up look at modern technologies of war. They situated the armed forces within Britain's imperial and national past, creating and sustaining imperial and national identities. The armed forces themselves saw military spectacle as propaganda meant to garner public support and government financing in an era of reluctant defense spending. Overall military spending atrophied for various reasons, causing each military branch to scramble after the scraps. Before the Great War, the Royal Navy and British Army could count on receiving half the central government's annual budget. During the interwar period, spending shifted to welfare and funding the debt.² With no obvious threat until the rise of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany in the 1930s, the government instituted the 10 Year Rule; the assumption that the next major war was at least ten years away. This rule helped justify a massive paring back of military expenditure during the 1920s before being finally abandoned in 1932; a year that represents the nadir of military spending during the 1930s.³

In a new age of mass politics, public opinion became even more important.⁴ Britain

¹ For some context, Wimbledon in 2013, with expanded seating and an even more fan friendly environment compared to the interwar period, drew 486,898 spectators over a fortnight. In 1931, 169,208 people paid to see the RAF Air Display at Hendon on one day. Probably a similar number watched from nearby without paying for a ticket. 415,560 people paid for a ticket to Navy Week in 1938, while 403,000 attended the Aldershot Tattoo, which was performed over a five night period, in 1932. Attendance figures pulled from The Times. A graph displaying attendance figures at the major displays discussed in this dissertation is included in the Appendix.

² David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth Century History* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 235.

³ Robert Crowcroft, *The End is Nigh: British Politics, Power, and the Road to the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 47.

⁴ Patrick Kyba, *Covenants without the Sword: Public Opinion and British Defence Policy, 1931-1935* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983), 3.

became far more democratic after the First World War, with the electorate increasing from 30 per cent of adults to 75 per cent of adults for the election of 1918. Additional reforms in the 1920s enlarged the electorate even further.⁵ Scarred by the Great War, many Britons turned to pacifism, joining such groups as the Peace Pledge Union and the No More War Movement. A majority of Britons favored further disarmament rather than rearmament as a strategy to achieve Britain's national security by the early 1930s.⁶ The 1935 Peace Ballot showed that a desire for disarmament and collective security, if not outright pacifism, was widespread despite the rise of the Nazi threat.⁷ Indeed, the electorate demonstrated little enthusiasm for military spending before the late 1930s.

The mostly Conservative-dominated governments of the era hewed closely to public opinion. They did so not only in the crafting of political rhetoric or platforms, but in policy-making as well. The National Government adopted the scheme for the creation of a mighty bomber fleet in 1934, for example, not after a well-thought out consideration of the military viability of such a fleet, but due to what Stanley Baldwin identified as the public's "semi-panic" in the face of the German aerial threat.⁸ Against this background, the three military services attempted to influence public opinion by means of their own propaganda. They had to convince the public not only that military expenditure was necessary, but also that scarce funds should be appropriated to one military branch rather than another. While the United

⁵ Ibid, 39.

⁶ Ibid, 12. This belief might seem contradictory, but it was tied closely to the theory that the arms race played a significant role in starting the First World War.

⁷ Martin Ceadel, "The First British Referendum: The Peace Ballot, 1934-1935." *The English Historical Review* 95, no. 377 (October 1980), 838.

⁸ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century*, 2nd Edition (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2000), 117.

Kingdom was not the nation hardest hit by the worldwide economic downturn of the 1930s, fiscal retrenchment nevertheless limited the funds available for the armed forces. A zero-sum situation arose: each pound spent on one branch meant a pound not spent on either of the other two. Armed forces almost always want more funding and government financing is finite, but the interwar period featured rancorous competition *between* what was now three independent services with the emergence of an independent RAF. Prior to the First World War, the Royal Navy usually got what it wanted; after the war, the Navy had to compete not only with the RAF and the Army, but also against vocal opposition to armaments altogether.⁹

In 1930, Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald declared, “Our Navy is no mere superfluity to us. It is us.”¹⁰ Decisions made in 1934 set the spending pattern in motion, but by 1938 the RAF had clearly won the competition for funding.¹¹ That year the RAF received more funding than either of the other senior services. The government even admitted that RAF expenditures came at the expense of the Navy's operational effectiveness.¹² 1938 must be viewed as a watershed in British history. This stunning rearrangement announced a strategic reorientation. The Royal Navy, also known as the “Senior Service,” the first line of

⁹ Kyba, *Covenants without the Sword*, 9; B.J.C. McKercher, “The Politics of Naval Arms Limitation in Britain in the 1920s,” in *The Washington Conference, 1921-1922: Naval Rivalry, East Asian Stability and the Road to Pearl Harbor*, eds. Erik Goldstein and John Maurer (Ilford, U.K.: Frank Cass, 1994), 36.

¹⁰ Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth Memo to Admiralty, 1930, ADM 116/2478.

¹¹ With the Geneva Disarmament Conference ending in failure in 1934, the government established a Defense Requirements Committee. Their report led to a Cabinet decision to move forward with aerial rearmament, even at the expense of the Royal Navy and RAF. By 1938, the RAF received £133.8 million, the Navy £127.2 million, and the Army £122.3 million. In addition, the RAF started from a much lower overall amount in the early 1930s, signifying a clear change in prioritization. Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics, 1932-1939* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980), 69-70; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1983), 286.

¹² Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda, in the Twentieth Century: Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 94.

defense for the British Isles, was relegated to a secondary status.¹³ How this happened merits close scholarly attention.

The decision to prioritize the RAF did not follow simply on a pragmatic calculation of interests and resources. Policy-making occurs in a cultural and political milieu that defines such interests while proposing the types of force needed to secure them. The Royal Air Force rose to preeminence in this period not only because it was the newest or objectively the most important service, but because it more effectively tapped into and reflected the assumptions and values of the British people and government. Historians have noted how popular ideas about the destructiveness of air power played an important role in determining British foreign policy and rearmament decisions in the interwar period.¹⁴ As early as 1924, the government produced an estimate that in the first month of a war, London could expect almost 80,000 casualties. These estimates remained mostly unmodified throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵ They proved highly inaccurate, especially at the start of the war in 1939. 45,000 British civilians were killed and an additional 50,000 were injured during the entirety of the war. Wayne Lee has noted that the appeal of air power may appear technical, but “a closer look, however, reveals how much assumptions, faith, and institutional culture have determined technology selection and air power doctrine.”¹⁶ As one of the most important forms of military propaganda, military displays were instrumental in shaping and reflecting popular ideas about war and Britain's military needs.

¹³ Kennedy, *British Naval Mastery*, 286.

¹⁴ Bialer, *Shadow of the Bomber*; Kyba, *Covenants without the Sword*; Barry Powers, *Strategy without Slide Rule: British Air Strategy, 1914-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).

¹⁵ Powers, *Strategy Without Slide Rule*, 122.

¹⁶ Wayne E. Lee, “Mind and Matter: Cultural Analysis in American Military History: A Look at the State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 4 (March 2007), 1125.

The use of “interwar” as a term to describe the 1920s and 1930s belies a sort of historical fatalism. It describes an age defined not by what it was, but by what came before and after; an age of recovery from one war and of preparation for another. Scholars should obviously avoid looking at the 1920s and 1930s in a deterministic way that finds explanations for all things in the First World War. They should also avoid the teleology of looking backwards from the outbreak of the Second World War. If the 1920s and 1930s can be represented as a chasm between the two World Wars, the most insightful analyses will involve stepping out into that wide chasm and making one's way over one or more of the many retrospective bridges connecting events before with events after. Some of these bridges tie into one another while others lead to dead ends or to entirely different destinations. Many of them are hidden from sight by those standing on either side by smoke, or clouds, or perhaps by other bridges. Only by situating ourselves in an era, in that chasm, in a process Johann Herder called *Einfühlung* (“to feel into”), can we resurrect the infinite multitude of possibilities and lost opportunities.¹⁷ Still, the use of the term “interwar” is not entirely an *ex post facto* imposition. Especially by the 1930s, with the rise of fascist provocation in Europe and Japanese expansion in the Pacific, people in Britain and in much of the world believed another global reckoning was coming. I intentionally use the term “interwar” in the title not just as a shorthand for the 1920s and 1930s, but because my analysis centers on the portrayal of past and future wars at the military displays of these decades. This dissertation consciously

¹⁷ Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2001), 62.

embraces the “inbetweenness” of the era.¹⁸

Each service used propaganda or cultural means to manipulate public opinion, implicitly acknowledging the role of the public in shaping policy. Their ability to do so was limited by cultural accretions belonging to particular military technologies and competing discourses on the Great War, militarism, pacifism, individualism/collectivism, and imperialism. In pursuit of popularity, each service shaped these displays in response to public praise and criticism. This often diluted the narrower messaging meant to lead the public towards specific conclusions regarding the future needs of Britain's national defense. The displays proved to be extraordinarily popular, but they did little to promote a grounded understanding of each service's role in past or future wars. The Royal Navy and the British Army, in particular, struggled to make ships or soldiers look less like interesting symbols of the past and more like vital components of Britain's defense in the next war. Airplanes, however, benefited from being a relatively new technology upon which hopes and fears could be projected. In addition, air power, which represented the “totalizing” nature of modern war by further eliminating distinctions between civilians and combatants, benefited from the simultaneous decline of “civilianism” in the interwar period. The decline of some long-held tenets of liberalism, on the other hand, helped undermine the Royal Navy's position as the nation's “Senior Service.” For centuries, the Navy benefited from its claim that it could defend Britain against foreign enemies on the high seas while simultaneously shielding

¹⁸ I use the term “inbetweenness” without in any way embracing the project to “escape the methodological essentialism that continues to dominate Western logic; the relentless search for the singular and true nature of things.” Post-Modern terminology can be useful without embracing the Post-Modern project. Paul Basu, *The Inbetweenness of Things: Materializing Mediation and Movement between Worlds* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2.

British subjects from the specter of militarism at home. With memories of the Great War in mind and the compelling vision of the aerial threat stoking fears of what was to come, the Royal Navy's justification as the defender of Britain's liberal order seemed almost quaintly traditional. The RAF's displays at Hendon and Empire Air Day benefited from these broader perspectives on air power, but they also did their part to promote “air-mindedness” and an exaggerated sense of air power's transformative nature. This “air-mindedness” ultimately accounts for the RAF's growing share of the military budget, but the displays at Hendon and Empire Air Day did little to teach the public about official RAF strategic doctrine. Limited by the aerial fleet on hand, these displays could never fully illustrate official RAF doctrine regarding the primacy of the counter-offensive bombing campaign to the public. While the reception of the military displays of the era indicate a robust, open political culture, the displays ultimately must be counted among the most important sources of misinformation during the interwar period regarding Britain's national defense. They represent key factors contributing to expectations about the next war, which led to specific decisions regarding the allocation of funds as Britain rearmed in the 1930s.

This dissertation contributes to scholarship on the cultural history of the military, the history of British rearmament, the history of propaganda during its most formative era, and the history of Britain's shifting identity as a naval and imperial power. No one has made the comparative study of interwar military displays found here. While other works have examined individual displays, none have attempted a sustained analysis of their messages and public reception. This dissertation assesses the significance of these displays in reflecting and shaping popular opinion concerning each military branch. This type of analysis became

more common with the development of the “New Military History,” often termed the “War and Society” approach, which emerged around fifty years ago. The “New Military History” (which is no longer so new) has expanded the subject of military history beyond the narrow confines of the battlefield to include the study of war and military institutions in wider contexts using different methodologies.¹⁹ Traditionally, military historians tended to neglect the cultural context of warfare and the symbolic aspects of military displays and technologies. Jeremy Black has noted how this neglect has been reversed recently, but he has also warned against the dangers of too readily focusing on the symbolic aspects of military subjects at the expense of more straight-forward military interpretations.²⁰ Still, Black recognizes that public ritual involving each military branch in Britain provided “both forum and force for identity” and that military spectacle helped give shape to public policy.²¹

Chapters One and Two focus on the British Army's tattoos during the interwar period. The tattoos I analyze are exclusively of the parade ground variety. Readers looking for a cultural history of inked skin in the British Army must unfortunately look elsewhere.²² The word “tattoo” in this context comes from the Dutch word “taptoe,” which means to “tap the tap of a cask.” The word seems to have entered the English language during the 17th century, which is not surprising considering England's military support of the Dutch during their long

¹⁹ John W. Chambers, “Conference Review Essay: The New Military History: Myth and Reality,” *The Journal of Military History* 55, no. 3 (July 1991), 397.

²⁰ Jeremy Black, *Rethinking Military History* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2004), 56-57.

²¹ Jeremy Black, *War and the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 165.

²² This history could better be told through a history of the Royal Navy anyway. British sailors played an important role in introducing European societies to the indigenous practice of tattooing the skin. See Daniel Owen Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy: Empire and Imperialism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 195.

struggle with the Habsburgs for their independence.²³ The beating of drums at night signaled to taverns the need to “tap the tap,” or stop serving beer. To soldiers it meant a return to camp. Over time, the trumpet replaced the drum and the “tattoo” turned into the period between the “first post” and “last post.” During this intermission musicians marched up and down the square playing music. The music and rituals became more elaborate as tattoos evolved.²⁴ Tattoos developed into a sort of nighttime military parade meant to entertain the public while integrating the garrison into the local community. The Aldershot Tattoo takes center stage in this dissertation as the most prominent of these tattoos, but the tattoos at the British Empire Exhibition of 1924-1925 and more regional displays at Ravensworth, York, and Tidworth are also examined. The first Aldershot Torchlight Tattoo dates back to 1894, when the Duke of Connaught arranged the performance for his mother, Queen Victoria.²⁵ After a brief hiatus during the Great War, the Aldershot Command Searchlight Tattoo recommenced in 1920.²⁶ A garrison town and close to the nearby Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, Aldershot was and remains the home of the British Army. For a few days each year, this garrison town became a mecca for hundreds of thousands looking to dazzle and be dazzled all at once.

Chapters One examines the phenomenal success of the Wembley Tattoo, which was held as part of the British Empire Exhibition in 1924 and 1925. The success of this tattoo set

²³ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “tattoo,” <https://www-oed.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/view/Entry/198121?rskey=3u8TZr&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> (accessed July 10, 2020).

²⁴ Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876-1953*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 211.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 218.

²⁶ *The Times*, June 17, 1920.

in motion a tattoo craze over the coming years. As they proliferated, tattoos created a political battleground in which supporters and critics alike competed over their meaning(s). While critics opposed these tattoos generally on the grounds of “anti-militarism,” scenes from the Great War and simulations of modern warfare proved most controversial. The Wembley Tattoo inspired subsequent tattoos to present scenes from the Great War in a manner described in this dissertation as “the Whig interpretation of history writ in blood.” John Keegan coined this phrase to describe the historical approach of the Victorian military historian Edward Creasy, who justified his focus on the unpleasant violence of war by emphasizing the progress each of the famous battles he studied helped promote.²⁷ Whig historians, from Henry Hallam to Thomas Babington Macaulay, conceived of British history as the unfolding story of British parliamentary institutions, progress, and liberty.²⁸ For Creasy, and for the organizers of British tattoos, this progress came “red in tooth and claw.” The Labour government in 1930 temporarily put an end to this Whiggish pageantry when it banned the representation of the Great War and modern war at military displays. Although the bans would not stick, these fights over representation suggest that by the late 1920s the British people increasingly viewed the Great War as a break from the past rather than one more link from the past to the present.

Chapter One illustrates the difficulties tattoo organizers faced in situating the First World War into a Whiggish historical frame; the medium (the pageant) found itself at odds with the content (the Great War). Chapter Two demonstrates the various obstacles

²⁷ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 55-60.

²⁸ Marwick, *The New Nature of History*, 74.

confronting tattoo organizers in their attempts to use pageantry as propaganda. Military tattoos of the era represented sites of public memory, mourning, and discourse rather than sights of public manipulation from above in an age of mass politics. At these illuminated parade grounds and in subsequent accounts found in newspapers and elsewhere, one finds a discussion in image and word of what it meant to be British, the meaning of heroism, and the importance of the individual. Attendance at military tattoos, especially the Aldershot Tattoo, rose to phenomenal heights in the 1930s. Organizers of tattoos became increasingly sophisticated in their tracking of public opinion. They reacted to popular opinion and criticism, ultimately developing a formula that satisfied a broad swathe of the public. In doing so, the tattoos revealed a national consensus concerning the depiction of the First World War that focused on sacrifice rather than victory, gratitude rather than glory. They perpetuated what Brian Bond and Samuel Hynes have called “the myth of the Great War.”²⁹ The military tattoos of the interwar period did not display some hegemonic discourse employed by a manipulative elite. This speaks to a healthy society, but the organizers sacrificed propaganda for popularity and ultimately failed to create a more informed public, especially from the Army's perspective. The Army neglected to illustrate its accomplishments in the Great War at Aldershot and elsewhere. As a result, military tattoos did little to instill in the public a belief in the future relevance of a strong British Army.

Chapter Three demonstrates how the First World War, the decline of key components of the “Navy myth,” and inter-service rivalry helped give new shape to interwar naval

²⁹ Brian Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-2. See also Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Pimlico, 1992).

displays. Like the army displays of the era, naval displays grew tremendously popular. The Edwardian era has often been considered the high-tide of navalism, but the popularity of interwar fleet reviews, navy week, and the Greenwich Night Pageant supports Jan Rüger's contention that the “naval stage” reached another high water mark before the Second World War.³⁰ This dissertation argues, however, that the interwar period witnessed the transformation of naval displays from performances seeking acclamation to performances providing justification. Numerous challenges made this transition difficult and the Royal Navy struggled in its propaganda to justify the maintenance of its status as the nation's premier military branch.

Chapter Three demonstrates the difficulties organizers of naval displays faced in producing effective, rather than simply popular, propaganda. This same challenge confronted each of the military services. After starting with a description of the Silver Jubilee Fleet Review of 1935, Chapter Three explains the origins and elaboration of Navy Week in the late 1920s. A growing social welfare state, distance from the Great War, and local traditions at Portsmouth help explain the creation of the first Navy Week in 1927. Organizers succeeded in making Navy Week an incredibly popular annual event. Held solely at Portsmouth the first year, Chatham and Plymouth began hosting their own Navy Weeks starting in 1928. At these annual affairs, spectators bought tickets to walk aboard His Majesty's ships, see sailors up close, listen to music, and witness demonstrations, mock battles, and historical simulations. Many in the Royal Navy quickly recognized that Navy Week could provide a rejoinder to the spectacle and propaganda found at the Aldershot Tattoo and the RAF's Hendon Air Display.

³⁰ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 11.

Admiralty records reveal an increasingly sophisticated effort exerted by the Royal Navy to use Navy Week to promote “naval-mindedness” in the face of widely assumed and feared public apathy. Duncan Redford, echoing the fears of navalists at the time, has argued that the interwar years found a British public less and less interested in its Navy.³¹ Attendance numbers at Navy Week suggest otherwise, but analysis of the content and reception of Navy Week suggests this popularity did little to change minds concerning the importance of the Royal Navy vis-à-vis the other military services. The propaganda at Navy Week proved popular without being necessarily effective.

Chapter Three then discusses the importance of the so-called “Navy myth,” which includes the Royal Navy's long-standing association (or at least coexistence) with classical liberalism. This dissertation argues that the continued transformation of liberalism during the interwar period helped hasten the Royal Navy's declining reputation as the nation's most important (rather than popular) military service. Navy Week employed the language and imagery of the “Navy myth:” empire, liberty, individualism, free trade, markets, and food stood as catchwords to stir the public to support their Navy once more. With the Great War, the decline of liberal ideology, and the rise of the bomber, these catchwords and tropes became less convincing and beguiling. In examining some of the most important military thinkers of the era, this section suggests a dividing line between the few who maintained a belief in the primacy of naval power versus those who embraced the overriding significance of air power in modern warfare. The former typically sought a method of warfare that could

³¹ Duncan Redford, “The Royal Navy, Sea Blindness and British National Identity,” in *Maritime History and Identity: The Sea and Culture in the Modern World*, ed. Duncan Redford (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 62.

safeguard civilian life from the militarizing effects of warfare, while the latter tended to believe that this was either impossible or not preferable. The point here is not to suggest that those who supported naval power were right, but to understand that strategic preferences derived from underlying, often ideological, assumptions.

Like the military tattoos of the era, Navy Week struggled to use the First World War in its propaganda. The Royal Navy undoubtedly played a decisive role in winning the Great War, but the Navy's primary contributions proved difficult to stage as convincing spectacle. Jutland, Zeebrugge and other battles all played their part, but a dreadnought Trafalgar never materialized. This same challenge confronted the creators of the Greenwich Night Pageant in 1933, perhaps the outstanding example of naval spectacle and propaganda during the interwar period. Pageant-master and popular historian Arthur Bryant and Vice-Admiral Barry Domville masterminded the Greenwich Night Pageant. Bryant situated the stage for the pageant in between the William and Mary Buildings of the Old Royal Naval College designed by Christopher Wren. Bryant presented a potted history of Britain's past naval glories using scripted dialogue spoken by amateur actors and screen projections. While Chapter One shows the difficulties organizers of military tattoos faced in situating the Great War into a Whiggish historical narrative, Chapter Three illustrates how Bryant's own peculiar Tory historical sensibility did little to recommend the fleet as Britain's first line of defense in the future.

Chapter Three concludes with a discussion of the role of the airplane in naval displays. This section introduces a scene at the Coronation Fleet Review of 1937 to illustrate the very different roles airplanes and ships fulfilled as stage actors in military propaganda.

Ships, aircraft, submarines, and tanks all carried with them certain physical limitations, unique innate qualities, or cultural associations that affected their use and reception in military spectacle. These factors made the primary goal of naval propaganda, which was to remind the public of the continued importance of naval power, that much more difficult to achieve. Organizers of Navy Weeks and fleet reviews, for example, evinced fear that the use of aircraft at naval displays would only lead to misconceptions about the significance of air power. The Royal Navy proved reticent to show off the Fleet Air Arm as a result. In demonstrations at Navy Weeks that did feature the Fleet Air Arm, organizers attempted a balancing act in which naval aviation was offered as a new tool for the fleet rather than its replacement. On the other hand, caught between a rock and a hard place, naval spectacle occasionally came under criticism for lacking the dynamism and excitement of the aerial display at Hendon. The goals of achieving a popular show and delivering the right message often stood at odds. Only with the termination of the Trenchard-Keyes arrangement, in which responsibility for the Fleet Air Arm was split between the RAF and the Royal Navy, was this tension relieved. As rearmament spending kicked into high gear and reduced some of the competition between the services, the Royal Navy finally appeared willing to unabashedly promote the might of its Fleet Air Arm in its plans for the eventually canceled Navy Week in 1939.

Chapters Four and Five center on the propaganda of the Royal Air Force at the RAF Aerial Pageant (renamed the RAF Display in 1925) and Empire Air Day.³² Chapter Four

³² *The Times*, April 24, 1925. The RAF felt “display” implied that the show was simply a part of training and a yearly reminder of technical and tactical progress. The word “pageant” suggested showmanship.

argues that the propaganda at the RAF Display and Empire Air Day succeeded in promoting “air-mindedness” in the British public, but failed to depict air power in either a realistic manner or in a way that supported official RAF doctrine. Like the Royal Navy and the British Army, the RAF struggled to manage its message in its use of spectacle. Chapter Five delves into the politics of air power to explain its broad appeal and its reception at Hendon and Empire Air Day in particular.

The first RAF Aerial Pageant took place at Hendon in 1920. It was held annually each summer until 1937. The event became one of the premier spectacles of the time in England and a fixture of the London Season. Hundreds of thousands of spectators, whether observing from the stands or from outside of the aerodrome, observed breathtaking aerobatics and simulated battles complete with staged villages or docks. All this was accompanied by more traditional features of military spectacle, including brilliantly dressed soldiers marching the grounds with martial music ringing through the air. Explosions, music, speed, the roar of combustion engines – Hendon could be a dizzying affair. The airplane represented the ultimate symbol of technological modernity. Even before the First World War, the Futurists, including the British painter C.R.W. Nevinson, idealized airplanes for their speed and power.³³ Aviation took tremendous leaps forward (at least in its ability to destroy) during the First World War. Its aces were romanticized as veritable knights engaged in courtly aerial combat in the midst of a most unchivalrous war. On the other hand, man's mastery of the air

³³ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2000), 216-217. Nevinson was hired as an official artist of the British Army during the Great War. After witnessing battle scenes firsthand, Nevinson abandoned some of his modernist tendencies and adopted a more realistic approach in his official paintings.

seemed to abrogate Britain's long-cherished insularity; the United Kingdom was “no longer an island.”³⁴ Only a few years prior to the first RAF Aerial Pageant, the British people were craning their heads to the sky out of fear rather than as a pastime. During the Great War, German zeppelins and aircraft raided British cities 103 times (51 by zeppelin and 52 by aircraft). These raids resulted in 4,820 casualties, including 1,413 deaths.³⁵ The short-term and long-term psychological impact of these raids and the effect they had on subsequent British strategic thought, however, far outstripped the material impact of these raids during the war. Indeed, after the war, the Germans concluded that the bombing campaign did not represent a positive return on investment. Nevertheless, according to Tami Davis Biddle, “The early raids were an indelible trauma” for the British people “that could not be wholly erased by subsequent events.”³⁶ The First World War introduced or heightened certain perspectives on air power, including the glamour of the pilot and the dread of terror bombing, but it was clear that the war had provided only a glimpse of its role in future wars. Spectators came to Hendon with the memories of the First World War in mind, but the rapid pace of technological change in aviation at the time allowed for imaginations to run free.

Chapter Four provides a roughly chronological history of the RAF Air Display and the RAF's decision to transition to Empire Air Day in the late 1930s. The early shows at Hendon focused on depicting events from the First World War, but organizers quickly seized the opportunity to emphasize the role of the RAF in colonial policing. They did this by

³⁴ For an examination of this shocking realization, see Alfred M. Gollin, “England is No Longer an Island: The Phantom Air Ship Scare of 1909,” *Albion* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 43-57.

³⁵ Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas About Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 327.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

incorporating “set pieces” in which aircraft bombed generically exotic villages, thereby scattering the native troublemakers and restoring order. Having only established its independence in 1918, the RAF faced a hard fight to maintain this independence during a time of financial retrenchment in the early 1920s. The RAF Aerial Pageant represented a way for the RAF to stimulate public support for their infant service during these years of austerity. One of the ways the RAF fought back against attempts by the Royal Navy and British Army to swallow the RAF was to insist it could control far-flung areas of the British Empire far more efficiently than the Army. Organizers at Hendon used these “set pieces” at Hendon to demonstrate this process of “substitution,” or the replacement of land and/or naval forces by (cheaper) military aircraft. These “set pieces” came under criticism from pacifists and critics of imperialism, but depictions of colonial policing at Hendon were never completely abandoned. Changes in the composition and capabilities of the aerial fleet proved to be the most important factor in explaining the evolving program at Hendon in the 1930s. Especially after 1933 and the clear rise of the German threat, anti-imperial and pacifist criticism of the RAF Display collapsed. Organizers felt free reign to construct shows that reflected the RAF's strategic vision of the counter-offensive bomber fleet. Equipped with a newly enlarged aerial fleet made possible by the beginning of rearmament in 1934, the RAF Air Displays of the late 1930s featured large formations of bombers meant to overawe onlookers with their implicit power of destruction.

Chapter Four also discusses the difficulties the RAF faced in not just encouraging “air-mindedness” at Hendon, but in ensuring the public “read” its displays correctly. As demonstrated at fleet reviews and Navy Week, aircraft had an ability to impress onlookers

even when the aircraft on hand were of inferior quality. The Air Ministry often feared the public would not understand the dire need to invest more in an underfunded RAF. In addition, until the late 1930s, the RAF Displays could not effectively demonstrate official RAF doctrine, which professed the primacy of the counter-offensive bomber fleet in protecting the British Isles. As the RAF discovered, unless bombers could be brought together *en masse*, they looked rather unimpressive in action compared to nimble fighters. The RAF's narrower messaging at air displays regarding colonial policing or the bomber offensive was often undermined by the inherent qualities of airplanes themselves or by competing discourses. For example, the greater versatility of fighters made them the backbone of any aerial display, but RAF doctrine maintained that the fighter would play a subordinate role to the bomber in any future war. The individualist strain in British culture also worked in favor of the fighter pilot rather than the bomber crew. Indeed, the aerial displays of the interwar era helped to further consolidate the glamour of the fighter pilot established during the First World War while serving as a bridge to the romanticization of “the few” during the Battle of Britain.³⁷ As was the case at the military tattoos and naval displays of the era, the RAF could not impose its views on the public in the skies above Hendon. All three services produced popular military displays; however, the RAF benefited from propaganda that was actionable. Air power, without the weight of history or tradition, represented the future far more distinctly than the Royal Navy or the British Army.

³⁷ Even today, the popular image of the Second World War is of the fighter pilot rather than the bomber crew. This is despite Bomber Command's greater share of the burden than Fighter Command during the war. Bomber Command suffered nearly 60,000 killed in action compared to the less than 4,000 killed in action in Fighter Command. Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 71.

Jacques Ellul makes a distinction between “agitation” and “integration” propaganda. Agitation propaganda seeks to move people to action while integration propaganda seeks to encourage acceptance of authority or the status quo.³⁸ Chapter Four argues that the transition from the RAF Air Display to Empire Air Day represents the transition from the former to the latter. The RAF decided to abandon the RAF Display at Hendon after 1937 mostly due to safety concerns, but the Air Ministry seized upon Empire Air Day as a substitute more compatible with RAF priorities in the immediate years before the outbreak of war. Having secured a huge increase in funding in 1937, which saw their budget grow from 82 million pounds in 1937 to 134 million pounds in 1938, the RAF's focus turned toward managing this extraordinary expansion.³⁹ The Air Ministry and the Air League of the British Empire collaborated in creating and operating Empire Air Day at military and civil aerodromes throughout the country. The first Empire Air Day took place in 1934 and would grow in popularity over the next five years. Empire Air Day represented a sort of RAF version of Navy Week in which airfields were opened to the public so that people could see airmen and aircraft up close. Each aerodrome also featured demonstrations of flying or scaled down versions of the spectacle at Hendon. Despite dealing with an almost overwhelmingly complex period of expansion, the Air Ministry devoted an incredible amount of care to studying the reception of Empire Air Days. After the first Empire Air Day, the Air Ministry required each station to file detailed reports in which station commanders noted how the event was received and offered advice on how to better shape perception at future iterations.

³⁸ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 188.

³⁹ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 286.

These reports represent the most thorough and systematic studies of public reception of military propaganda during the interwar period found in the National Archives. Officers and supporters of the RAF worried that shows at individual aerodromes on Empire Air Day could not possibly rise to the level of the displays at Hendon, which might put the reputation of the RAF at risk. Still, with an expanded fleet operating at airfields throughout the country, Empire Air Day ended up exposing or “normalizing” air power to far more people than Hendon ever could.

Chapter Five represents an intervention in the historiography concerning the politics of air power during the interwar period. This chapter argues that air power enthusiasm reflected a broad political consensus characterized by a technocratic-modernist rejection of liberalism. Neither an exclusively left-wing nor right-wing phenomenon, air power enthusiasts typically believed air power had fundamentally transformed warfare, which required (or would inevitably lead to) an equally drastic transformation of the state. Indeed, for left-wing thinkers like G.T. Garratt, L.E.O. Charlton, and J.B.S. Haldane, the air power threat represented a useful conceit to argue for the creation of a more collectivist and regimented society. This chapter argues that while the interwar period saw the rise of pacifism, it actually saw the decline of “civilianism.” Alfred Vagts defines “civilianism” as the true opposite of militarism, which seeks to “rank military institutions and ways above the ways of civilian life.”⁴⁰ Air power enthusiasts shared a conviction that civilians could and should no longer be shielded from war and the military virtues. While air power enthusiasts on the left and the right exhibited some differences in their views on air power, this chapter

⁴⁰ Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism: Civilian and Military* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 17.

shows how many of their assumptions and ideas were actually quite similar. In their views on air power, H.G. Wells and Oswald Mosley, for example, were not as far apart as one might imagine. On the other hand, those not swept away by enthusiasm for, or fear of, the airplane often remained committed, quixotically or not, to maintaining the traditional liberal order of priorities: the military virtues, while admirable in their own sphere, existed in order to *protect* and *preserve* the civilian sphere. This dissertation suggests the transition to the belief in air power as the ultimate arbiter of Britain's defense in the 1930s represents the death rather than the continuation of Britain's tradition of “liberal militarism.” For many at the time, the airplane probably caught their eye by simply being a sparkly new technology, but the airplane's significance as a cultural marker benefited from the simultaneous ideological decline of liberalism.

In *A Nation of Flyers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination*, Peter Fritzsche argues that “the social discipline of the state” was always implicit in any notion of “air-mindedness” and that aviation represented a clean break from the past.⁴¹ Fritzsche's insight, which reveals a highly illiberal idea implicit in aviation, raises questions about David Edgerton's thesis tracing the appeal of air power in Britain to a traditional adherence to “liberal militarism.” This dissertation sat about squaring these insights by closely examining the intersection of liberalism with the implications of air power. As I argue, the belief in the need for “the social discipline of the state” and an antipathy to tradition proved to be a far more reliable predictor of exaggerated views on the transformative nature of air power than

⁴¹ Peter Fritzsche, *A Nation of Flyers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 161, 219.

anything else during the era. Edgerton's thesis still has much to offer and contains at least one important insight: air power did represent a continuation of some of the elements of a traditionally liberal view of national defense. Like the *Dreadnought* battleship decades earlier, air power represented for many an opportunity to rely on the newest technology to fight wars more efficiently. The airplane, however, was not just new, it implied a completely different relationship between the state and the civilian. In an era in which this relationship had already been transformed by the Great War and an emerging collectivist ethos, this implication, as much as the airplane's novelty (after all, the submarine and the tank were also new), helps explain the zeal with which so many took up the airplane as either a technological savior or a doomsday machine.

Peter Fritzsche's role in inspiring this dissertation reveals the benefits of examining aviation trans-nationally. One necessary and regrettable exclusion in this dissertation is a sustained comparison between military displays in Britain and other countries. German Air Force Day, *Giornata dell'alla* In Italy, the Villacoublay air display in France, Navy Anniversary Day in Japan, and Navy Week at Kiel in Germany all merit further investigation and comparative analysis.⁴² With limited secondary material on any of these events, a proper study informed by archival research represents a potentially fruitful line of scholarly inquiry. The Epilogue to this dissertation manages to touch upon military displays in Great Britain after the dawn of the nuclear age. Nuclear weapons validated the grandiose visions of air power's potential destructiveness in the 1920s and 1930s. Descriptions of the “knock-out

⁴² *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, July 19, 1937.

blow” using traditional bombs proved to be mostly far-fetched, but nuclear weapons made these prophecies premature rather than fundamentally false.⁴³ In addition, military displays after the Second World War have taken place against the backdrop of the dissolution of the British Empire. I discuss changes in the public's perception of the three armed services in the decades after the Second World War in the Epilogue, but more work needs to be done here.

The use of military spectacle in interwar Britain demonstrates the limits of propaganda in relatively free and open societies. This should make us skeptical of meta-narratives that insist upon the ability of powerful institutions to manipulate us into making certain decisions. A nation's strategic culture, but also culture in general, as Jeremy Black has argued, “is a contested sphere, one that lacks coherence and, instead, is characterized by struggle.”⁴⁴ The public's reception of military displays demonstrates the significance inherited discourses and broadly held assumptions play in shaping our understanding of new phenomena and our expectations for the future. The British managed to avoid catastrophe in the Second World War despite possessing a popular vision of the coming war that was detached from reality. A common cliché is that generals are always prepared to fight the last war, but it is not only the generals who get it wrong and misjudgment is not always due to conservative resistance to understanding change. The British were far from alone in preparing for a different war than the one that came. The United States and the Confederate

⁴³ One could perhaps raise objections by noting the horrific scenes caused by the fire-bombings of Tokyo and Dresden. Estimates for the number of casualties from the Dresden raids between February 13-15 range between 35,000 to over 100,000. 80,000 were likely killed by the raid on Tokyo on March 10, 1945. Still, these were hardly “knock-out blows” at the beginning of a war that made traditional fighting on land and sea irrelevant. Both raids required years of fighting to establish air superiority and their contributions to ending the war are highly debatable. Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, 255, 261.

⁴⁴ Black, *War and the Cultural Turn*, 2.

States of America could not have anticipated the slaughter awaiting them at places like Antietam, Gettysburg, and Cold Harbor. How many millions in Europe believed the Great War would be over by Christmas after one or maybe a few glorious and decisive battles? These examples, and others could be provided, demonstrate a failure in anticipation based upon an underestimation or ignorance of changes in the technological, political, and economic spheres. The British people in the interwar period, on the other hand, anticipated a different war due to an overestimation of such changes and popular enchantment with what Rachel Holloway has called “the technological sublime.”⁴⁵ The study of history is perhaps the best way of teaching the futility of predicting the future. I hope my dissertation will suggest the importance of thinking about new military technologies, and new technology in general, with greater self-awareness.

⁴⁵ Rachel Holloway, “The Strategic Defense Initiative and the Technological Sublime: Fear, Science, and the Cold War,” in *Critical Reflections on the Cold War: Linking Rhetoric and History*, eds. Martin Medhurst and H.W. Brands (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 209-211

Chapter One: War and Whiggism at Wembley

In England all the boasting and flag-wagging, the 'Rule Britannia' stuff, is done by small minorities. The patriotism of the common people is not vocal or even conscious. They do not retain among their historical memories the name of a single military victory.

----George Orwell, "England Your England" (1941)

After the fiftieth performance of the Wembley Tattoo at the British Empire Exhibition of 1925, *The Times* concluded that it was "the most popular entertainment that has ever been given in England."¹ In a country with a proud, or at least pioneering, history of mass spectacle and entertainment, such a claim catches the eye. More popular, one might ask, than any of the grand monarchical ceremonies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? How about the most popular stage shows of the West End? The sardine-like, packed stands at F.A.

¹ *The Times*, October 24, 1925.

Cup Finals? Popularity is difficult to precisely gauge, but regardless of how much *The Times* may have been exaggerating, the undeniable popularity of a display staged by the military services in liberal England only seven years after the Great War is quite remarkable. While pacifism grew significantly during the post-war years, the British people refused to say “goodbye to all that” when it came to military pageantry. The subject of military propaganda in the 1920s and 1930s likely brings to mind the militaristic extravaganzas of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, but the significance of British military displays like the Wembley Tattoo should not be overlooked. Indeed, *The Times* and other papers could not help but remark on it, providing analysis of each performance of the Tattoo on a daily basis – a ceaseless parade of commentary about a parade-ground performance that seemed to many to make Wembley the center of the world, at least for a couple of months.

In its pageantry, the 1925 Wembley Tattoo presented what John Keegan has called the “Whig interpretation of history writ in blood.”² Britain's ancient and recent past consisted of military victories linked together in a chain of progress. The Wembley Tattoo caused a proliferation of similar tattoos presenting the same historical interpretation, in the process inciting opposition from pacifists and anti-militarists. By 1930, the Labour Government moved to ban the depiction of the Great War in military tattoos, illustrating the war's ambiguous popular perception in Britain. Many saw the Great War not as one more trial in the British people's progressive march through history, but as a caesura. Organizers of tattoos often struggled to situate the Great War alongside wars of the more distant past. The Great War would reappear in the tattoos of the 1930s, but its place in the historical pageantry

² Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 57.

remained anomalous. These tattoos could depict wars from the distant past in all their colorful, militaristic glory, but the Great War required *pathos*. The Great War could represent Whiggish progress, but its glories came from sacrifice rather than dashing victories. The tremendous popularity of tattoos in the 1920s suggests that militarism, as described by Vagts – that joy in things military not for their use but for their aesthetic qualities – remained appealing in an increasingly pacifist Britain so long as it kept itself to the world before 1914. This anti-militarism shaped a particular historical narrative at tattoos by the late 1920s, replacing an earlier narrative at the first post-war Aldershot Tattoos that emphasized British victories in the last stages of the Great War. Organizers faced a challenge of striking a balance between entertainment and didacticism in an age of mass entertainment and an enlarged electorate. The Army's pursuit of a crowd-pleasing narrative, however, often undercut their claims for continued public support and government funding.

The Wembley Tattoo, 1924-1925

In the opening scene of the 2010 film *The King's Speech*, Colin Firth plays a stammering Duke of York delivering the closing statements of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1925. While it is hard to compete with a speech memorialized in an academy award winning film, the opening speech of the British Empire Exhibition the year before was perhaps equally important. King George V, after a brief introduction by the Prince of Wales, opened the British Empire Exhibition with his first national radio broadcast and perhaps the first ever electronic recording in Britain.³ In his speech, the king spoke about the need to heal

³ The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was established in 1923. As Brad Beaven has noted, “the BBC’s coverage of the opening of the Exhibition was essentially the first attempt to broadcast a major ceremony to the nation.” Brad Beaven, *Visions of Empire: Patriotism, Popular Culture and the City, 1870-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2102), 165.

after the Great War and his hopes – those evergreen hopes of so many imperialists – that the exhibition would help illustrate the profound importance of the Empire to all his subjects. This exhibition differed in tone and purpose when compared to the Great Exhibition of 1851 or even the Festival of Empire in 1911, but the king called attention to the Great Exhibition of 1851 and to its “brilliant hopes of the growth of international peace and friendship with which it was inaugurated.”⁴ Organized by Prince Albert and the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture, and Commerce, the Great Exhibition represented a declaration of Britain's economic supremacy to the rest of the world. The Great Exhibition certainly exhibited the theme of “international peace and friendship,” but this peace was to be undergirded by British power – a *Pax Britannica*.⁵ The king suggested that the British Empire Exhibition's objectives were “not quite so ambitious,” yet he still hoped that Wembley would “bring the peoples of the Empire to a better knowledge of how to meet their reciprocal wants and aspirations.” The Great War's intervention had perhaps done the most to dampen those facile Victorian aspirations for international peace based upon free trade and global commerce. The wounds of the war, both mental and economic, loomed over the exhibition. The king, mustering up as much optimism as he could, hoped that the exhibition would lead “to a greater development of the material resources of the Empire and to an extension of trade.” This would, even incidentally, play some role in “raising the economic life of the world from the disorganization caused by the war.”⁶

The British Empire Exhibition of 1924-1925 illustrated how the war led to a renewed

⁴ *The Times*, April 24, 1924.

⁵ Susie Steinbach, *Understanding Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2012), 87.

⁶ *The Times*, April 24, 1924.

emphasis from certain sectors concerning the importance of the Empire, particularly the dominions within the Empire. Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas suggest that the First World War and the growing pacifist movement made a jingoistic, aggressive “muscular imperialism” less popular during the interwar period. The end of the first international period of globalization that preceded the First World War also led many to highlight the importance of the Empire as a large trading bloc in a world becoming increasingly closed off into national economies.⁷ John MacKenzie, in his influential *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960*, argued that imperialism penetrated deep into British culture. An “ideological cluster,” consisting of devotion to the monarchy, Social Darwinism/racism, and militarism, “constituted a new type of patriotism, which derived a special significance from Britain's unique imperial mission.”⁸ This imperialist ideology was disseminated to the public through the theater, the radio, and the cinema even without extensive government manipulation. After the First World War, the government became more directly engaged in pro-empire propaganda, establishing new organizations like the quasi-governmental Empire Marketing Board in 1926.⁹ Even as the intelligentsia moved away from an imperial ethos in the interwar period, the imperial message was nevertheless conveyed to the public.¹⁰ Scholars like MacKenzie and Andrew Thompson have noted that the public was

⁷ Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas, “Introduction,” in *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-building in Britain between the Wars*, edited by Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2011), 26.

⁸ John MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 2.

⁹ Stephen Constantine, ““Bringing the Empire Alive”: The Empire Marketing Board and Imperial Propaganda, 1926-1933,” in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, edited by John MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-3. The Hendon Display, Fleet Reviews, and the Aldershot Tattoo were advertised as high society affairs. The exact social composition of these displays is impossible to ascertain, but they quite clearly

receptive to an imperial message during a period of uncertainty and gathering threats.¹¹

Bernard Porter, on the other hand, argues that “popular ignorance of and apathy towards the empire can be pretty well established for these inter-war years.”¹² This dissertation will hardly present definitive evidence to support either side. Perhaps nothing will. The military displays of the era certainly spoke of empire, but each service did so using its own language. These displays illustrate the different empires of the imagination created through different cultural perspectives – the Empire was not one thing to all people and institutions. This not a new insight. After all, the “New Imperial History,” represented by scholars like Antoinette Burton, Philippa Levine, and Catherine Hall, has devoted scholarly attention to how the Empire was culturally refracted through the lenses of gender and race.¹³

The British Empire Exhibition of 1924-1925 represents perhaps the Empire's most remarkable popular manifestation during the interwar period. Statistics indicating the sheer scope of the British Empire Exhibition support this claim. While the Great Exhibition of 1851 drew six million visitors, the 1924-1925 Wembley Exhibition drew twenty-seven million.¹⁴ The latter stretched over 216 acres in northwest London. Wembley Park, situated on the outskirts of London, was transformed and pulled closer into an ever-expanding metropole. The Exhibition featured 25 pavilions dedicated to parts of the Empire, three

attracted the high-born, if not the high-brow.

¹¹ John MacKenzie, “The Popular Culture of Empire in Britain,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*, edited by Judith Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 230; Andrew Thompson, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics, c. 1880-1932* (Harlow: Pearson, 2000), 184.

¹² Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 273.

¹³ For a critical take on nearly every approach to imperial history, see Richard Price, “One Big Thing: Britain, Its Empire, and Their Imperial Culture,” *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 3 (July 2006), 602-627.

¹⁴ Brad Beaven, *Visions of Empire*, 163-164.

palaces (devoted to Engineering, the Arts, and Industry), gardens, an Amusement Park, a replica of Old London Bridge, and various other halls and kiosks. Some of the smaller structures were clearly meant to be temporary, but the Exhibition sought to make a statement about the British Empire's permanency. The official guide insisted that the Exhibition contained "no ephemeral structure designed to endure for a season and to pass thereafter into desolation or decay. The material chiefly used at Wembley for purposes of construction is concrete with steel. No lesser foundation would serve the purpose of Empire."¹⁵ The British Empire Exhibition Stadium, completed shortly before the start of the exhibition in 1923, was the centerpiece. The stadium would eventually come to be known simply as Wembley Stadium. Built to contain over 100,000 spectators, it hosted its first F.A. Cup Final in 1923 and would become the center of English football for the next eighty years until its replacement by the new Wembley Stadium in 2007.¹⁶

Jonathan Rose, John MacKenzie, and Jeffrey Richards have all emphasized the impact the Exhibition had on popular culture, but anecdotal evidence suggests the public interpreted the Exhibition in myriad ways.¹⁷ The official guide reminded readers that the "fundamental purpose of the British Empire Exhibition is serious." Still, with permanent exhibits like "The Great Bubble Fountain," "The Biggest Knife in the World," the "Daily Mannequin Parade," and a full-sized model of the Prince of Wales sculpted in butter, one could be pardoned for sometimes forgetting the exhibition's solemnity.¹⁸ That butter was not

¹⁵ G.C. Lawrence, *The British Empire Exhibition, 1924: Official Guide* (London: Fleetway Press, 1924), 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁷ Beaven, *Visions of Empire*, 164.

¹⁸ Lawrence, *The British Empire Exhibition, 1924*, 13, 116-119.

just any butter, however, it was Canadian butter. The Wembley Exhibition foreshadowed the efforts of groups like the Empire Marketing Board in encouraging the “imperial consumer.”¹⁹ The EMB hoped for the adoption of “imperial preference,” or the abandonment of free trade in favor of a sort of imperial *Zollverein*. Figures like Leo Amery and Lord Beaverbrook resurrected arguments made by Joseph Chamberlain and the Tariff Reform League during the Edwardian Era. Like Chamberlain, they believed that “Empire Free Trade” could bring the Empire closer together while protecting Britain's domestic economy from foreign competition.²⁰ Lord Beaverbrook's “Empire Free Trade Crusade” and the Empire Marketing Board proved more successful than their predecessors. In 1932, the Ottawa Conference established imperial protectionism. Shortly thereafter, in 1933, the Empire Marketing Board was dissolved, but the years in which it operated represent a period of heightened imperialist propaganda expressed by a concentration on politicized imperial commodities.

Some contemporary observers believed the Exhibition failed to stimulate imperialist feeling. The official guide stressed that there was “no undue insistence at Wembley upon the educational side” and that those who wished “merely to see a few of the more spectacular exhibits and then to amuse themselves” would be pleased as well.²¹ Perhaps too many took this concession to heart. “The Amusement Park,” the author Edward Shanks wrote, “ought

¹⁹ Erika Rappaport, “Drink Empire Tea: Gender, Conservative Politics and Imperial Consumerism in Interwar Britain,” in *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Britain*, eds. Erika Rappaport, Mark J. Crowley, and Sandra Trudgen Dawson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 141.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 142. “Empire Free Trade” represents one of the most clever and misleading political slogans in history. Similar to Voltaire's famous quip that the Holy Roman Empire was “in no way holy, nor Roman, nor an empire,” Empire Free Trade did not create a uniform imperial trading bloc and actually represented a repudiation of free trade. Voltaire's formulation is admittedly and unsurprisingly catchier.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

not be more than a concomitant. The Exhibition proper should be of genuine interest, and apparently it is not.” As Brad Beaven soberly concludes, “given the opportunity to become intrepid explorers of a miniature empire, working-class visitors appeared to have favoured instead a “pleasure-seeking” day trip.”²² Seemingly all of the great wits of the age, from Evelyn Waugh to Noël Coward to P.G. Wodehouse, took a swipe at the silliness of it all. Coward complained to a friend who accompanied him to the Exhibition, “I’ve brought you here to see the wonders of the Empire, and all you want to do is go to the Dodgems.” In a story for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Wodehouse has Bertie Wooster declare his indifference to it all: “I mean to say, millions of people, no doubt, are constituted that they scream with joy and excitement at the spectacle of a stuffed porcupine-fish or a glass jar of seeds from western Australia – but not Bertram.” Stumbling fortuitously into the West Indies section, a Green Swizzle cocktail salvaged what amounted to an intolerably boring day for poor Bertie.²³ Financially, the Wembley Exhibition ended as an undeniable failure. The organizers incurred losses close to £1.5 million despite a government subsidy of £2.2 million. This sets it apart from the major pre-1914 exhibitions, which all managed to make a profit.²⁴

Of course, the meaning of “Empire” is multivalent and, as scholars have noted, the Wembley Exhibition reflected dramatic shifts in the interwar period. Some, such as Daniel Mark Stephen, have argued that the Exhibition reflected a perceived need to move away from “starkly masculine ideas of conquest and domination” while drawing more attention to Africa

²² Beaven, *Visions of Empire*, 168-169.

²³ Ashley Jackson, *Buildings of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 256. “Dodgems” is a British term for bumper-cars.

²⁴ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 266.

and the “increased presence of women in the colonial sphere.”²⁵ Stephen admits “Britain's own “martial abilities” were celebrated through the prominent display of members of the WAFF [West African Frontier Force]” and talk of the Royal Air Force providing a “more efficient method of “policing” the colonial peripheries.”²⁶ He thus highlights how organizers and colonial officials struggled to manage the many “contradictory forces” at play during the exhibition.²⁷ This is an excellent point, and nowhere was this more true than in the depiction of war and the armed forces in the military tattoos of the Exhibition. Organizers did attempt to downplay an older, more violent notion of empire, but conquest remained a central trope, much enjoyed by spectators. Few could be under any illusion that RAF policing was predicated on bombs.

The three military displays were the most popular events of the Exhibition and even the Pageant of Empire was essentially a military pageant, featuring naval triumphs.²⁸ The Searchlight and Torchlight Tattoo at Wembley of 1924 ran from September 1 to September

²⁵ Daniel Mark Stephen, ““The White Man's Grave”: British West Africa and the British Empire Exhibition of 1924-1925,” *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 1 (January 2009), 106, 118.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 119, 106. The West African Frontier Force would eventually be renamed the Royal West African Frontier Force after King George V volunteered to be its Colonel-in-Chief in 1926. While organizers might have been eager to show off the WAFF in 1924, the delicate issues involved in inviting African soldiers to England would later resurface with the Colonial Office during preparations for the Royal Tournament at Olympia in 1929. The Inspector General of the RWAFF sent a letter requesting that the RWAFF be sent to Olympia because it would make for a good “advertisement” and “redound to the credit of the Colonies from which they came.” Of course, the Inspector-General noted, “proper barrack accommodation” was needed to “ensure undesirables do not mix with them and that they do not have contact with those who might damage the prestige of Europeans in their eyes.” He was answered by a nonplussed Colonial Office official who wrote, “I do not like “advertisement” even in these days but then I am a very antediluvian sort of person.” He also voiced concerns about using such soldiers to stage “savage warfare” scenes and that he did “not like the idea of troops being used as a comic spectacle.” The Royal Tournament Committee eventually decided against inviting the RWAFF. CO 820/4/17.

²⁷ Stephen, ““The White Man's Grave,”” 127.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

20, a week longer than initially planned due to public enthusiasm for the performance.²⁹

Tattoos, especially versions at the Royal Tournament at Olympia and the Torchlight Tattoo at Aldershot, existed before the Great War, but the 1920s witnessed their transition from humble, insular affairs put on for the delight of military men to grand spectacles for public consumption housed in modern arenas. The official programme for the Aldershot Tattoo of 1931, played up the humble beginnings of this British military tradition.

In its earlier forms the Aldershot Tattoo was a military spectacle pure and simple, being indeed an elaboration of the daily ceremony that marks the day's end in every garrison of the British Army. These tattoos were carried out with flaming torches, bands and guards marching and counter-marching, but from these comparatively simple shows have sprung the wonderful entertainments of the Post-war Tattoos in Rushmoor Arena, now attracting spectators from the ends of the earth.³⁰

The First Searchlight and Torchlight Tattoo at Wembley in 1924 represents a challenge to our understanding of militarism, or at least militarism as defined by Vagts. Vagts recognized that the mere existence of a strong military does not mean a society is militaristic. Vagts wrote, “an army so built that it serves military men, not war, is militaristic; so is everything in an army which is not preparation for fighting, but merely exists for diversion or to satisfy peacetime whims like the long-anachronistic cavalry.”³¹ Would Vagts therefore suggest that the post-war tattoos represented a rise in militarism or its decline? The post-war tattoos were not put on solely for “military men;” far from it. In fact, the post-war tattoos sought to appeal to the civilian, the average man and woman, but were they mere diversions to “satisfy peacetime whims”? Were tattoos, as Charles Péguy noted about French military displays, a

²⁹ *The Times*, September 22, 1924.

³⁰ *1931 Aldershot Command Searchlight Tattoo Programme* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1931), 3.

³¹ Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, 15.

mere “subjects for inspiration, an exercise for the imagination”?³² Perhaps, but the stagers of tattoos believed they were doing much more than that. They believed in public enlightenment or, to use that much more historically loaded word, propaganda.

The Manchester Guardian emphasized the vast differences between pre-war tattoos and the first Wembley Tattoo at the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. The correspondent noted, “one can hardly think that in pre-war days a military spectacle would have attracted so great a crowd, or that any crowd would have been so technical in its criticism.”³³ 50,000 people saw the Tattoo on opening night. By the end of its three week run the Tattoo was drawing around 80,000 spectators per night.³⁴ The show featured elaborate drill, military music, the collective singing of hymns, a reenactment of the Battle of Balaclava, a demonstration of an air raid, and firefighting.³⁵ *The Times* emphasized how the Tattoo would increase “the pride of the average citizen in his fighting men,” which it believed was likely to be “a little vague.” *The Times* generally viewed the Tattoo as stimulating interest, providing “fascinating lessons,” and “showing” modern warfare.³⁶ This Tattoo was not make-believe, nor some historical trifle or militaristic fantasia; rather, *The Times* viewed tattoos, and military displays in general, with solemnity, suggesting they could play an important role in shaping public opinion.

Knowing precisely what spectators liked or did not like about the Tattoo or whether

³² Charles Péguy, “Notre Patrie,” in *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873-1914*. Vol 2. (Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Française, 1920), 320.

³³ *Manchester Guardian*, September 2, 1924.

³⁴ *Ibid*, September 2. *The Times*, September 22, 1924.

³⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, September 2, 1924.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

they viewed it with high seriousness or as mere entertainment is impossible to know. The press sought to assess popular reception, or, to be more precise, journalists interpreted and invented the public mind. Despite their very different political bent, *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* came to similar conclusions about audience reactions.³⁷ *The Times* reported, “the climax of enthusiasm was reached during the “air raid,” which seemed incredibly realistic to observers.³⁸ The old-time drill carried out by “descendants” of soldiers at Waterloo stood “in full force of contrast, when modern warfare, with raiding aeroplanes, the crash of bombs, and the roar of anti-aircraft was shown in mimic “frightfulness.””³⁹ The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* similarly reported that “not a few in the audience shivered even as they enjoyed the spectacle.”⁴⁰ Rather than being a purely Army affair, all three services combined to stage the Wembley Tattoo, but it appears that airmen and aircraft stole the show. *The Times* (London) suggested the Royal Air Force was “perhaps most praiseworthy of all – because they were creating rather than upholding a tradition.”⁴¹ The press emphasized that aircraft seemed to elicit the most emotion from audiences. Having only emerged as an independent service in 1918, the RAF did not possess a rich history to appeal to or a tradition of pageantry to rely upon. The RAF, and aircraft in general, often represented, whether intentional or not, an injection of the modern into military displays saturated with the weight

³⁷ *The Times* represented mainstream Conservative opinion and often served as a mouthpiece for the Conservative-dominated governments of the interwar period. *The Guardian*, on the other hand, represented the left. Agreement by these two newspapers provides strong corroboration for an underlying truth. For a discussion of the close ties between the National Government of the 1930s and *The Times*, see Crowcroft, *The End is Nigh*, 147.

³⁸ *The Times*, September 2, 1924.

³⁹ *Ibid*, September 30, 1924.

⁴⁰ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, September 2, 1924.

⁴¹ *The Times*, September 30, 1924.

– or dignity, depending upon one's perspective – of the past.

The British public's fascination with the RAF, only recently piqued by the “frightening” aerial displays at Wembley in September 1924, found another outlet with the premier of “London Defended” in May of 1925. At first, before the planners of the exhibition caved to popular demand for another searchlight tattoo, “London Defended” was slated to be the only military display staged for the 1925 Exhibition. The show featured illuminated airplanes swooping above the stadium amidst anti-aircraft “fire” from guns within Wembley. The airplanes dropped their “payload,” setting off fires within the stadium to be put out by firemen. *The Times* described it as “an astonishing spectacle” and “a scene of excitement and terror” that featured “a riot of light and colour such as no fairyland ever dreamed of being.”⁴² The title of the show is interesting in itself, for the moral of the show, or at least the outcome, stood at odds with orthodox strategic thinking in the British Air Staff and Air Ministry. Both were dominated by that towering figure of the RAF's early history, Chief of the Air Staff Hugh Trenchard, who firmly believed in the irresistible power of the bomber in modern warfare.⁴³ This view was perhaps most famously illustrated in 1932 with Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's grim prophecy to Britons that the “bomber will always get through.”⁴⁴ A more fitting title for the show might have been “London Destroyed,” or, if that was too macabre, perhaps Wembley could have been turned into a mini-Berlin or the actual “fairyland” described by *The Times* and obliterated according to RAF projections. The

⁴² Ibid, May 11, 1925.

⁴³ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, 75.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 108.

Labour politician and Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs at the time, Sir Arthur Ponsonby, a strong believer in the threat of the bomber, complained that the displays of aerial defense at Wembley were giving the people a false and dangerous sense of security.⁴⁵ Here is a man of the left not necessarily suggesting that the displays are dangerously militaristic *per se*, but that military displays must provide a reasonably accurate message or at least a message that does not sanitize war. “London Defended” proved to be even more popular over its first six shows than the Wembley Tattoo of the previous year. 348,192 attended the former compared to 301,555 for the latter. The British public's appetite for military displays at Wembley had still not been sated; in fact, it was only gaining momentum.

The much-anticipated Wembley Tattoo of 1925 premiered in the middle of August. During the first week, visitors thronged the stadium desperately seeking tickets, which were in short supply. Over 250,000 spectators witnessed the first seven shows.⁴⁶ The Tattoo was extended on two separate occasions in response to public pressure. *The Manchester Guardian* estimated that two million spectators packed into Wembley to see the Tattoo during its run.⁴⁷ The Tattoo attracted Britons from all over the country and from every class, and people from all over the world. Tickets ranged from four shillings to one shilling, making them quite affordable for the time. *The Times* reported that trains were “being run in duplicate and a few in triplicate from all parts of the kingdom” in order to bring people to the Tattoo.⁴⁸ The king and queen attended as well as Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, the latter enjoying it so much

⁴⁵ *Hull Daily Mail*, November 16, 1925.

⁴⁶ *The Times*, August 31, 1925.

⁴⁷ *The Manchester Guardian*, October 30, 1925.

⁴⁸ *The Times*, September 26, 1925.

that he suggested the Tattoo should be held every year.⁴⁹ Military attachés and other foreign dignitaries attended, making the Tattoo an important event in crafting foreign perceptions of the British military and national mood.⁵⁰ The Tattoo was slated for a five-week run, but due to popular demand five weeks turned into over two months, with the last performance taking place near the end of October right before the end of the Exhibition.

The press provided detailed reports for nearly every show and the Tattoo became what can only be described as a national phenomenon. *The Times* suggested that the Tattoo would be remembered as the most important and popular aspect of the British Empire Exhibition and that “the public demand for the prolongation of the Tattoo has been so insistent that it has become almost a national request. Very strong representations have come from provincial towns.”⁵¹ In addition, criticisms of their coverage were deemed off base. “In some quarters it [the Wembley Tattoo] has been maliciously or stupidly criticized as tending to a glorification of militarism; but no criticism could be wider of the mark.”⁵² As an earlier column on the Tattoo concluded, “there is nothing militarist in an offensive or an aggressive sense.”⁵³ Thus, the paper proposed instead that Britons were engrossed by a public and popular celebration of national – if not imperial – healing and bonding.

The program for the Tattoo featured a solemn and emotionally wrought message of recent British wounds being cured by links to a glorious past and an equally glorious future of imperial unity. The scene of pageantry opens quietly in darkness. The peace is then

⁴⁹ Ibid, October 6, 1925. *The Times* demonstrated Ramsay MacDonald's recently relegated status with a laconic, biting conclusion to a column devoted to Baldwin: “Mr. Ramsay MacDonald was also present.”

⁵⁰ Ibid, September 25, 1925.

⁵¹ Ibid, September 18, 1925.

⁵² Ibid, September 17, 1925.

⁵³ Ibid, September 7, 1925.

interrupted by the sounds of battle and the call of the “Last Post.” The strains of “Tipperary” emerge and “battle-stained soldiers” appear through the “smoke” with “tin helmets.”

Some of them have their feet wrapped in old sandbags, some are limping on sticks, and some are roughly bandaged. Half-way across the arena the band of stragglers pause and send up a cheer. Then, to the strains of “Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag” there enters a group of colours representing Great Britain and her Dominions and Colonies who took part in the Great War. Behind the colours come a band, cavalry, guns, stretcher-bearers, and limbers. [. . .] The lights die down, to glow again with a pale blue light. Campaigners of the past are then to be seen – Crusaders, Clive's men, Crimean heroes, and others. [. . .] little groups of Chelsea Pensioners are seen pointing the way to some of the smallest of Boy Scouts, thus illustrating the dedication of youth to the service of the Empire.⁵⁴

The soldiers of the Great War appear not as the victorious soldiers of the final battles of the war, but as the haggard, wounded veterans of Flanders who “straggle” and “plod wearily across the arena.”⁵⁵ The scene concludes with the collective singing of “Abide with Me,” the appearance of rows of crosses in fields of poppies, and a triumphant exit accompanied by joyous music. *The Times* described the final scene as “culminating, purgatively like some great tragedy in the ancient sense.”⁵⁶ Considering the symbolic use of the Cross of St. George and the singing of hymns, it is no surprise that it seemed to spectators like they were participating in a “religious rite” or a “national ritual.”⁵⁷

This scene offers us an early and official presentation of the Great War as an event of public memory. Scholarship has focused on the role of public monuments, film, and literature, but we need to know more about how the military understood the war experience and how it shaped the public's understanding of it as well. Displays served as sites of what

⁵⁴ Ibid, August 24, 1925.

⁵⁵ Ibid, September 16, 1925.

⁵⁶ Ibid, September 17, 1925.

⁵⁷ Ibid, September 7, 1925.

Jay Winter has termed “historical remembrance.”⁵⁸ While earlier tattoos at Aldershot presented the Great War more positively and later tattoos would showcase the more distant reaches of the British past, the 1925 Wembley Tattoo's treatment of the Great War occupies a sort of middle ground. In addition, it exhibits the emphasis on mourning, remembrance, and the appeal to traditional values and imagery that Winter discusses. *The Times* suggested that “events of recent years have burnt deeply into the consciousness of the race [. . . yet it was] the appearance of the weary and war-worn band of survivors, cheerful in spite of all, that stirred memory and lent to the singing an earnestness that showed that the spirit of the “Recessional” is not yet dead.”⁵⁹ The events of recent years were not just the battles of the Great War, but the political changes sweeping through the world. “[S]o many false doctrines are being instilled into the minds of the people,” *The Times* lamented; yet, as a letter to the editor suggested, the Tattoo was strengthening the “forces of cohesion and idealism against the disruptive and materialistic agencies which threaten us at every turn.”⁶⁰ A letter to the editor helped to label this threat with more specificity. The letter, written by a former pageant master, labeled the key threat as Bolshevism, but the disruptive effects of colonial nationalism and the rise of Labour fed into this siege mentality.⁶¹

The Times, like the organizers themselves, consistently downplayed the notion that the Tattoo glorified war: “When the historic memory has to be invoked, as it is rightly and impressively in certain episodes, it is not invoked vaingloriously, but with a purified

⁵⁸ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale, 2006), 11.

⁵⁹ *The Times*, October 1, 1925.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, September 10, 1925, September 18, 1925.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, September 5, 1925.

symbolism from which all the dross of grosser suggestion has been refined away.⁶² *The Times* suggested that the Tattoo offered a rejoinder to the “militarist and pacifist alike,” and whether or not this is entirely accurate, the presentation of the military and of the Great War at the Tattoo exhibits Keegan's “Whig interpretation of history writ in blood.” Keegan traces this tradition back to Victorian England and the works of the military historian Sir Edward Creasy. Creasy's *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* rivaled Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* as a non-fiction Victorian best-seller. Keegan also points out that all three argued that competition, although sometimes unpleasant and even bloody, leads to progress.⁶³ For Creasy, according to Keegan, “war had a purpose; it had made the nineteenth century. [. . .] Battles are important. They decide things. They improve things.”⁶⁴ Writing about Quebec's Tercentenary celebrations in 1908, H.V. Nelles argues that cultural performances such as pageants are “revealing moments in which societies make profound statements in symbolic language about their deepest beliefs.” The pageantry involved often “conflates, foreshortens, jumbles up, selects the better bits, and sometimes embellishes or invents as it goes about its civic purpose of recall in living form.”⁶⁵ The 1925 Wembley Tattoo portrays “Crusaders, Clive's men, Crimean heroes” all coming to the aid of soldiers of the Great War as if all were fighting one long war for the same cause – namely, the future prosperity of the British Empire in its particular post-war form.

This present-minded foreshortening of history, or the use of the past to serve the

⁶² Ibid, September 7, 1925.

⁶³ Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 56-57.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 60.

⁶⁵ H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 168-169, 182.

present, is often pivotal for the creation and evolution of a sense of national identity. As Ernest Renan famously wrote in 1882, “L’oubli, et je dirai même l’erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la formation d’une nation.”⁶⁶ It is in the very nature of pageants to simplify the past and blur the line between spectator and performer, the past and the present. Herbert Butterfield points out that the Whig view of history often does not emerge as a result of willful bias, but that it has its root in the psychology of historians seeking the easiest way to find significance in the past. For Butterfield, “all history must tend to become more whig in proportion as it becomes more abridged” and the Whig interpretation leads to “the ratification if not the glorification of the present.”⁶⁷ This, then, brings us back to Creasy’s quote about battles being important because they decide things. The 1925 Wembley Tattoo situates the Great War in its glorious past not because of its inherent glorious nature, but because it is just one more battle in the history of British imperial progress. The war is presented using entirely somber imagery, yet it is only rescued from tragic *pathos* by its links to the past and the future. In contrast, at the 1924 Wembley Tattoo, the searchlights shining on the brilliant “antiquated uniforms” of soldiers dressed for the historical reenactment of Balaclava made them seem “supermen” to the audience.⁶⁸ Even the display of the “guard-mounting of a century ago proved to be a fascinating lesson in military history.”⁶⁹ The fascinating, the pleasant, the joyous, the glorious – these emotions were safely stimulated by a distant past. The militarism described by Vagts, that joy found in military things for their

⁶⁶ “Forgetting, and I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the formation of a nation.” Ernest Renan, *Qu’est ce qu’une Nation?* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1882), 9.

⁶⁷ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Bell and Sons, 1931) v, 6.

⁶⁸ *The Manchester Guardian*, September 2, 1924.

⁶⁹ *The Times*, September 30, 1924.

aesthetic rather than practical qualities, is noticeably absent in the portrayal of the Great War at the 1925 Wembley Tattoo.

Interwar tattoos and pageants did not always present the Great War as the somber, tragic event that, as Voltaire's Pangloss might have put it, “was necessary in this best of all possible worlds.” Some portrayed the Great War with an emphasis on British victories. Others simply ignored portraying the Great War at all, instead focusing on earlier wars or even wars from the world of make-believe. While tattoos and historical pageants seem to inherently display teleological tendencies, the great English pageant master Louis-Napoleon Parker believed pageants to nevertheless be fundamentally anti-modern.⁷⁰ Parker, interestingly enough, helped usher in the “modern” English pageant with the Sherborne Pageant of 1905. His pageants “combined drama, procession, and dance” to provide a moving history of a community.⁷¹ Robert Withington, writing about English pageantry at the end of the Great War, suggested that the Parkerian pageant was “probably the result of various forces which in the last century began to turn men's minds to the past” and that it had “been a potent educational force.”⁷² The Sherborne Pageant set off a short-lived pageant craze prior to the outbreak of war in 1914. Five of Parker's pre-1914 pageants, which usually were performed over a week, drew an average of 80,000 spectators per night.⁷³ According to

⁷⁰ Robert Withington, *English Pageantry: An Historical Outline*, Vol. 2 (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1963), 195.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 233. Jacques Barzun suggests that history became the “characteristic discipline of the nineteenth century” in part as a reaction against the generalizing tendency of the Enlightenment. Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 465-466.

⁷³ Paul Readman, “The Place of the Past in English Culture, c. 1890-1914” *Past and Present* 186 (February 2005), 170.

Withington, Parker sought to “revive or maintain a memory of the past,” but to do so he thought it better “to emphasize the remoter past” and skirt around historical events that still divided the community.⁷⁴ Paul Readman points out that very few of these pageants “dealt with British history proper: many finished their chronological survey before the eighteenth century.”⁷⁵ Despite this break and the overlooking of contentious historical events, Readman insists that the Parkerian pageants utilized historical continuity as a means of fostering a sense of national identity. For Readman, the pageants represent the important place of history for the average Briton during the Edwardian era, but also during the modern period in general. Jose Harris and Peter Mandler, however, have suggested that modernity marginalized history as a subject of interest in popular English culture. Modernity produced change so rapidly that Britons began to prioritize the future, according to Mandler, or “the unique dominance of the present time,” according to Harris. Readman's thesis fits with the works of scholars like David Cannadine and Eric Hobsbawm. Both have shown how modern nationalism (and it is debatable whether there is any other kind) required a proliferation of history, or at least a proliferation of “tradition making.”⁷⁶ Readman suggests a genuinely popular craving for history amongst all classes, rather than manipulation by an elite. To prove this, he attempted to show popular engagement and participation with this “tradition making” in the form of the pageant. Readman points to the scope of the supplementary literature and the sheer popularity of the pageants.⁷⁷ Of course, this could very well simply prove how

⁷⁴ Withington, *English Pageantry*, 221.

⁷⁵ Readman, “The Place of the Past in English Culture,” 179.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 148-150.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 170, 174-175.

effective the pageant was as “an artificial imposture, mediated through ritualized ceremony at the behest of the ruling classes,” rather than proving it to not be a creation of the manipulative “ruling classes” at all.⁷⁸ Interwar military displays provide evidence for both sides of the debate. David Matless has suggested that interwar English culture sought to “ally preservation and progress, tradition and modernity, city and country in order to define Englishness as orderly and modern.”⁷⁹ Indeed, military pageantry employed the past and the future, the traditional and the modern as tools in a high-stakes competition for public support.

Withington predicted in 1918 that with the coming of peace, “patriotism and national pride” would “demand expression,” and the pageant would once again be revived.⁸⁰ This proved to be quite prescient as the interwar period did witness a revival in pageantry. The 1925 Wembley Tattoo incorporated elements of the pageant, especially the scene representing the soldiers of the Great War being joined by soldiers of the past. The Parkerian pageant attempted to tie together the history of a locality with the broader “story of England.”⁸¹ The British Army, Royal Navy, and Royal Air Force used pageantry at military displays in a similar fashion during the interwar period. They sought to situate their particular service into the British national and imperial story. The 1925 Wembley Tattoo, unlike the Parkerian pageants, chose to depict a recent and still complicated historical event in the Great War. This scene, as illustrated by the extensive coverage in the press, was extraordinarily popular, yet the depiction of the Great War – and modern war in general – at military displays would

⁷⁸ Ibid, 150.

⁷⁹ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 14. Quoted in Readman, “The Place of the Past in English Culture,” 199.

⁸⁰ Withington, *English Pageantry*, 228.

⁸¹ Readman, “The Place of the Past in English Culture,” 176-177.

became hotly contested by the late 1920s. The military services had to construct a sense of community and maintain public and financial support in the face of austerity, a vastly enlarged electorate, and an increasingly vocal pacifist movement. In making their case, each branch ultimately found it necessary to justify its track record in the last war.

Paul Fussell and Samuel Hynes have argued that the Great War represented a break from the past, ushering in “modern memory” itself according to Fussell. Chastened perhaps, the modern world nevertheless did not entirely give up on heroism. As Joanna Bourke argues, heroism was simply redefined in favor of the special man – the ace pilot or Lawrence of Arabia – at the expense of the pre-war idealization of the average Tommy.⁸² This is perhaps why *The Times* rhapsodized about the men of the Royal Air Force. During the Tattoo, four hundred men of the RAF used lanterns in a darkened stadium to create the illusion of airplanes in flight. According to *The Times*, these men were “gallant,” “joyous in spirit,” and ultimately “irresistible in their appeal.”⁸³ Gallantry, that old-fashioned virtue so closely associated with chivalry and past military glories, still applied to airmen, but airmen did not win the Great War. The dominant experience of the Great War - the mud of the trenches and the massive losses in Flanders Fields – seemed disjunctive. What did those dreary horrors have to do with Agincourt's “band of brothers,” Drake's *sang-froid*, or the Coldstream Guards at Hougoumont? Pageantry requires seamless continuity, but the Great War was supposed to be different. Indeed, it had to be different in order to warrant the sacrifice. By its end, the war against the Central Powers had become a war waged against barbarism itself, a “war to end

⁸² Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 25-28.

⁸³ *The Times*, September 2, 1925.

all wars.” Its very name, the Great War, implied distinctiveness in scope and significance. In addition, the battles of the Great War still existed in the realm of memory rather than merely in the realm of history for most. More than a memory, the Great War still lived on; its legacy made manifest with every scarred or mutilated body, every bereaved parent or spouse, and countless other visible and invisible ways. To group the Great War with other wars of the past would be to tacitly accept that war had a future; a future few wanted to contemplate, much less celebrate.

Proliferation and Response

The success of the 1925 Wembley Tattoo promoted the creation and popularity of British military displays in subsequent years. *The Times* noted that the Wembley Tattoo “produced a widespread desire for further opportunities to witness the Services at work under ideal conditions.”⁸⁴ This led directly to the Leeds Tercentenary and Military Tattoo (1926), the Birmingham Tattoo (1926), the Manchester Tattoo during Civic Week (1926), the York Tattoo (1926), and an increase in accommodations for the Aldershot Tattoo.⁸⁵ Captain King, the Financial Secretary to the War Office, reported to the House of Commons that the 1925 Tattoo had probably affected recruitment and that “the Army Council hope[s] that tattoos may be organized next year by the military authorities on the lines of those at Aldershot and Tidworth.”⁸⁶ The First Lord of the Admiralty, after attending the tattoo, admitted “he would have liked the Navy to provide a similar display, but he quite saw the difficulties.”⁸⁷ In 1927,

⁸⁴ Ibid, October 13, 1925.

⁸⁵ Ibid, October 30, 1925.

⁸⁶ Ibid, December 9, 1925.

⁸⁷ Ibid, September 24, 1925.

the Royal Navy would try its hand at holding an annual military display in the form of Navy Week. Tattoos became so popular and in demand in the south by 1928 that the Army had to place a limit on their proliferation.⁸⁸

The 1925 Wembley Tattoo provided an example for tattoos elsewhere. Its success caused the Aldershot Tattoo to focus on an imperial theme for its 1926 show.⁸⁹ Like the 1925 Wembley Tattoo, the 1926 Birmingham Tattoo established continuity between great British victories of the distant past and the Great War. The press suggested “the public demonstrated that though they are interested in the exploits of 1685, 1745, and so on, the British Army which is near to their heart – and likely to be during the present generation, at any rate – is the tin hatted khaki army which made its name in France and, indeed, every theatre of war, in the last great conflict.”⁹⁰ The Official Programme described how this khaki-clad army in “wave after wave, advance in their turn to victory, thus upholding the traditions of the past.”⁹¹ Similarly, the organizers at Aldershot did not shy away from simulating modern warfare alongside reenactments of Hastings and Agincourt. Here again we see a fundamental belief in the historical continuity of warfare in what the organizers called, “Visions and Realities.” This simulation featured a coordinated attack with artillery, airplanes, and tanks working together to destroy a village.⁹² Previous Aldershot Tattoos had made a concerted effort to link these simulations with the lessons learned at the end of the Great War. In describing the

⁸⁸ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, October 12, 1928.

⁸⁹ *The Times*, December 12, 1925.

⁹⁰ 1370. Private Papers of F.H. Lawrence 87/19/1A. Newspaper clipping. Imperial War Museum. Henceforth, the Imperial War Museum will be abbreviated IWM.

⁹¹ “Official Programme of the Birmingham Tattoo,” 1926. IWM

⁹² *Ibid*, June 16, 1926.

simulation of modern warfare at the Aldershot Tattoo in 1924, *The Times* noted that there was “nothing about it of make-believe.” It illustrated an episode that happened “a score of times during the German retreat.”⁹³ The 1926 Aldershot Tattoo was the most successful to date and plans to enlarge the grounds followed shortly after its conclusion.⁹⁴ The same cannot be said for the 1926 Birmingham Tattoo, which coincided with the General Strike. This disrupted transportation to and from the tattoo, resulting in a £7,000 loss.⁹⁵

While the Birmingham Tattoo ended in financial failure, other tattoos struggled to even get off the ground. The Manchester Tattoo held during Civic Week faced opposition from pacifist groups like the Fellowship of Conciliation and the Council for Prevention of War. Both groups sent a letter of protest to the mayor and the *Manchester Guardian* published a letter to the editor that gave voice to local concerns. The letter argued that recent examples of tattoos had “shown that these affairs are merely attempts to arouse admiration for the practices of war.” He went on to ask, “how can we protest against militarism on the continent when we give it such a glorified place in our own national life?”⁹⁶ Pacifists and anti-militarists stopped tattoos elsewhere over the next few years. In 1926, the city council of Sheffield, whose members were mostly in the Labour Party, turned down a proposal to hold a tattoo, with one of the councilors suggesting that they were merely attempts “to throw a musical halo of devotion over warlike methods.”⁹⁷ In 1927, the Bradford City Council also rejected a proposal for a tattoo, even doing so over the recommendation of its Finance

⁹³ Ibid, May 19, 1924.

⁹⁴ Ibid, December 1, 1926.

⁹⁵ T 161/282.

⁹⁶ *The Manchester Guardian*, September 7, 1926.

⁹⁷ Ibid, April 7, 1927.

Committee. In 1928, the Leeds City Council voted 30-28 to reject a proposed tattoo. A Labour member of the council, Mr. J. Thornton, explained his vote: “If you show us what the soldier's life is really like and what war really is like I will withdraw my objection at once because it would be the finest argument against war we could have.”⁹⁸ In a column that downplayed the dangers of the rejected Bradford Tattoo, *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette* declared that no child was attracted to “soldiering in a tank or an armoured lorry.”⁹⁹ While some socialists seemed to think that representations of the Great War and modern warfare should be banned altogether, supporters of tattoos typically suggested that the public merely needed an honest portrayal of the Great War.¹⁰⁰ They often downplayed the sinister nature of the tattoos, suggesting that they merely served as reminders of past sacrifices. A member of Leeds's city government saw “no reason why anybody should have to apologise for our Army.”¹⁰¹

Opponents and critics of military tattoos often seemed to talk past one another. Speaking of the Leeds Tattoo in 1929, Lieutenant-General Sir Cameron Shute of the Northern Command insisted that it was not propaganda; it was merely entertainment. Since there was no display of modern warfare, it could not be called militaristic. To some critics, however, the very act of reducing martial imagery to mere entertainment represented militarism or the glorification of military culture. Alderman Alf Masser of the Leeds City Council suggested that a tattoo presenting a scene about the War of the Roses, a scene as

⁹⁸ Ibid, September 28, 1928.

⁹⁹ *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette*, September 20, 1928.

¹⁰⁰ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, October 10, 1928. Socialists on the Bradford City Council actually proposed eliminating soldiers and sailors from a WWI memorial. The *ex post facto* attempt to create the first soldier-less war failed to pass in council.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, August 28, 1928.

distant from contemporary concerns as could be imagined, could not possibly be considered militaristic. Yet, while supporters often emphasized the “entertainment” aspect of tattoos when it served their purposes, they had no problem imbuing tattoos with an almost sacred solemnity at other times. The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* insisted that spectators left the Aldershot Tattoo with a feeling of “quiet spiritual elation, a renewed pride in England, in her history and people.”¹⁰² Secretary of State for War Tom Shaw in the Labour Government of 1929-1931 found himself in the unenviable position of being pulled in two directions by the critics of tattoos. Some pacifists wanted him to prevent the Aldershot Tattoo from displaying anything warlike whatsoever, while others wanted it to more fully show the horrors of war. Sympathetic to both sides, Shaw exclaimed in exasperation, “What is a person to do?”¹⁰³

Shaw, or at least the Labour Government he served, decided in 1930 to eliminate representations of the Great War and modern warfare in military tattoos. In an exchange with Lieutenant-Commander Joseph Kenworthy in the House of Commons, Shaw stated:

The Army Council have laid down the general principles which are to be observed in arranging programmes for military tattoos, and have given instructions that no items are to be included which portray incidents connected with British military history subsequent to the outbreak of the Great War or which introduce new and experimental methods of warfare.¹⁰⁴

When asked to explain the decision, Shaw replied, “the Army Council considered that the memories of the Great War were too vivid and too recent to permit of representation, in pageant or tableau.”¹⁰⁵ It is unclear exactly how much pressure was applied to the Army

¹⁰² *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 13, 1935.

¹⁰³ *Manchester Guardian*, May 29, 1930.

¹⁰⁴ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 27 May 1930 vol 239 cc979-80.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Council by the new Labour Government, but it seems far too coincidental that such a turnaround had nothing to do with pressure from above. *The Times* would report in 1935 that Major-General J.C. Hardinge-Newman, who was instrumental in developing the Aldershot Tattoo, retired in 1930 after the Labour Government objected to the display of modern armies.¹⁰⁶ Members of parliament remained suspicious even in the face of Shaw's insistence that his Government had not placed any restrictions on the Aldershot Tattoo.¹⁰⁷ Shaw and his government clearly attempted to restrict the number of new tattoos on the grounds that they were interfering with training.¹⁰⁸ Regardless of whether Shaw's explanation was the actual reason for government opposition, the Labour Government he served helped bring to a crawl the tattoo craze that earlier local opposition had already slowed down.

Conclusion

The Labour Government did not stop the production of tattoos, nor did its conclusion end opposition to the inclusion of modern warfare in tattoos. Aldershot and Tidworth still held tattoos every year, each year becoming more and more popular. Other cities held tattoos over subsequent years as well, but the rapid proliferation spawned by Wembley was halted. Perhaps more important is how the Labour Government seemed to affect the content of the Aldershot Tattoo, which was by far the most popular annual tattoo of the interwar period. The 1930 Aldershot Tattoo did not feature a simulation of modern warfare or any reference to the Great War. Over the next few years, Aldershot focused on the distant past. With an air of

¹⁰⁶ *The Times*, February 4, 1935.

¹⁰⁷ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 06 May 1930 vol 238 c751.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*,

approval, the *Manchester Guardian* described the 1932 Aldershot Tattoo as a “glorious anachronism,” which had “no use for the khaki, the mud, and the blood of the great war.”¹⁰⁹ *The Times* lamented the lack of a modern set-piece in the 1930 Aldershot Tattoo, which deprived it of “something of the activity of some of its predecessors.”¹¹⁰ By 1933, however, the organizers of the Aldershot Tattoo had reintroduced a depiction of modern warfare and in 1934 they incorporated a scene depicting the Great War. Thirty-nine free church ministers of all denominations passed a resolution deploring the Ravensworth Tattoo in 1934 for a similar scene. The letter asserted that “to present the progress of the nation as consisting of battles is to foster a wrong sense of historical values.”¹¹¹ A more direct riposte to Edward Creasy is hard to imagine. The battle over the “Whig interpretation of history writ in blood” at military pageants carried on until the outbreak of the Second World War.

In “England Your England,” George Orwell wrote:

The gentleness of English civilisation is perhaps its most marked characteristic. [. . .] And with this goes something that is often written off by European observers as 'decadence' or hypocrisy, the English hatred of war and militarism.¹¹²

This English hatred of war and militarism is at the very least a unique type of hatred. The public discourse over the holding of tattoos does perhaps show a peculiarly English taste for endless discussions of war and militarism. In the same essay, Orwell notes that “the names of the great battles that finally broke the German armies are simply unknown to the general public.”¹¹³ This public blind spot should not be surprising considering the presentation of the

¹⁰⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, June 10, 1932.

¹¹⁰ *The Times*, June 18, 1930.

¹¹¹ *Manchester Guardian*, May 26, 1934.

¹¹² Orwell, “England Your England,” 257

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 258.

Great War at the popular tattoos of the era. In this way, the military tattoos performed a great disservice to the British public, and British military propaganda in general during the interwar period helped to only encourage a distorted view of the lessons of the recent past and the threats of the near future. Paul Fussell and Samuel Hynes have argued that the Great War represented a break from the past. Indeed, spectators at British military displays recognized the distinctiveness of the Great War. Pageantry, however, requires continuity, which means that the military displays of the interwar period often had to deal with a medium in conflict with its content.

Chapter Two: “The Selection that Humane Memory Itself Makes:” Military Tattoos as Sites of Public Discourse in the 1930s

Like Hugo, their master and their God, the people, the common people, like the common Hugo, utilize the military for at least three contradictory purposes; the people asks the military for parades only they can provide, the reviews of the 14th of July and all other pageantry, all other demonstrations; they demand from war and the military an occasion for the exercise of malediction and their moral, sentimental, public, oratorical, official, philanthropic, scientific, eloquent, learned, socialist, materialist, historical, syndicalist-revolutionary reprobation; thirdly, they demand of war and the military a subject of inspiration, an exercise of the imagination when reading back into the past, interpreting the

present, anticipating the future, they want to make themselves believe that they have not lost the taste for adventures, when, finally they are tired of being bored by the images of peace.

¹

---Charles Péguy, “Notre Patrie” (1905)

For much of the 1930s, tattoos at Aldershot, Tidworth, Ravensworth, and Nottingham exhibited a sort of division of labor. Displays of old battles - both real and fictional - sought to produce the spectacular, the glorious, and the comedic. Displays of the Great War sought to create solemnity and instill grateful remembrance. Displays of modern or futuristic war sought to raise public awareness of the Army's effectiveness and the need for additional public support. In *Imperialism and Music: Britain, 1876-1953*, Jeffrey Richards argues that the Aldershot Tattoo “was propaganda at its most potent and beguiling.”² Rather than emphasizing the “potent and beguiling” nature of the propaganda at these tattoos as Richards does, this chapter will instead argue that propaganda at military tattoos was fraught with a complexity that helped to make efforts to direct or manipulate public opinion incredibly difficult. Instead, the military tattoos of the interwar period should be seen more as important sites of public memory, mourning, and discourse. By the 1930s, tattoo organizers faced a new landscape transformed by the emergence of threats in Europe and Asia. The intense militarism and nationalism of the Nazi regime stimulated debates on the place of tattoos in

¹ “Comme Hugo, son maître et son Dieu, le peuple, comme Hugo populaire le peuple populaire, utilise la guerre et les militaires à trois fins au moins, contradictoires; il demande aux militaires des parades comme ils peuvent seuls en fournir, des revues du 14 Juillet et tous autres apparats, toutes autres démonstrations; il demande à la guerre et aux militaires un exercice de malédiction, de réprobation morale, sentimentale, publique, oratoire, officielle, philanthropique, scientifique, éloquente, savante, socialiste, matérialiste historique, syndicaliste révolutionnaire; troisièmement il demande à la guerre et aux militaires un sujet d'inspiration, un exercice d'imagination quand remontant dans le passé, quand, interprétant le présent, quand, anticipant l'avenir, il veut se faire croire qu'il n'a point perdu le goût des aventures; quand, enfin, il est las de s'embêter dans des images de paix.” Charles Péguy, “Notre Patrie,” 320. Translation is my own with reference to the translation found in, Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, 21.

² Richards, *Imperialism and Music*, 245.

Britain. Producers adapted their shows over time in response to consumer behavior, helping to illustrate a sort of bare minimum cultural consensus concerning the representation of controversial subjects like war, nationalism, and the Empire.

The “multi-local” Stage of Military Tattoos

The British had never possessed a standing army before Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army and the Bill of Rights made sure to attach Britain's permanent army to Parliament rather than the king. This feature of British life – the longstanding lack of a permanent standing army followed by the creation of a limited one held accountable to Parliament – helped explain to many the unique origins of British liberty and constitutional government. This also meant that the British Army did not serve the same role as the French or Prussian armies, for examples, as a symbol and instrument of nationhood and nationalism.³ The British Army had been and remained a regimental army with deep roots in specific locations in Britain. While the War Office was ultimately accountable for any monetary loss, the Admiralty noted that contrary to Navy Week, tattoos were “entirely local to each command,” with one of the main aims being the raising of funds for local charities.⁴ In this way, tattoos sought to create a greater connection between army garrisons and the surrounding community. The British Army also had an advantage over the Royal Air Force in

³ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 292-302. While Jan Rüger suggests that authorities sought to justify expenditure on a German navy after unification in order to focus public attention on a truly “German” military service, this push originated in a context of Prussian militarism. As Confino notes, the Prussian army had been too connected to Prussian identity, and a new German Imperial Navy sought to transcend regional divisions. In contrast, the Royal Navy did not have to compete with a British (or English) Army as a symbol of national identity. Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 10.

⁴ ADM 179/63.

that the former could trace “the history of its units [by] going back through the centuries and recalling old and famous campaigns.”⁵

Scholars have not sufficiently recognized the mixed messaging tattoos often provided about the British Army's role in creating and sustaining the Empire. With the Ottawa Conference in July-August 1932, producers at Aldershot decided upon an imperial theme. As the *Surrey Mirror County Post* put it: “With fingers on the pulse of national feeling, the Tattoo Committee has judged the present time appropriate for a programme which, with its Empire motif, will stir loyalty of every British subject.”⁶ While this Tattoo definitely placed the Empire at the “centre of its ideological project,” this was not the case at every iteration of the Aldershot Tattoo, nor was the message clear about the role of the Army in this imperial vision. The 1932 show featured naval battles and scenes with seafaring heroes such as Sir Walter Raleigh and James Cook and businessmen/politicians such as Cecil Rhodes.⁷ A pageant centered on the British Empire naturally tended to steal focus away from the British Army, especially because the British liked to think of their Empire in this period as not being dependent on force.⁸ Commenting upon the Official Programme for the 1932 show, the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* wondered why the Army gave so much credit to Drake and the “Senior Service” for creating the Empire.⁹

The incredible popularity of the military tattoo in the interwar period, which

⁵ Copy #: S. 6/825. Shelf mark: 43(41).2/4-8. Southern Command Searchlight Tattoo, 1927. IWM.

⁶ *Surrey Mirror Post*, February 26, 1932.

⁷ *The Times*, June 8, 1932.

⁸ Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 330.

⁹ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, March 29, 1932.

especially outside of Aldershot focused on the connection of a particular regiment to a specific location, supports Billie Melman's argument that at this time the highly urbanized, global, and imperial nation began to develop a deep appreciation for a “more rural, inward-looking, and localized” image of its past.¹⁰ In order not to offend pacifist views, the Nottingham Tattoo focused on regimental history, the day-to-day life of modern soldiers, and sheer entertainment.¹¹ Likewise, the Tidworth Tattoo became renowned for “the note of intimacy, due to the proximity of the spectators to the performers and the natural beauty of the surroundings.”¹² The producers of the Tidworth Tattoo still presented scenes from the Great War throughout the 1930s, but they also included scenes of St. George and the Dragon (1933), the Loch Ness Monster (1934), “A Mechanized Foxhunt (1937), “A Modern Circus” (1938) , and “The Bombardment of Toytown (1938).”¹³ The Nottingham Tattoo, meanwhile, was known for its “romantic beauty” in a wooded environment perfectly suited for the staging of scenes featuring Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest.¹⁴ While not neglectful of empire, these tattoos tended to be by their very rootedness in the regimental history of the British Army more parochial and whimsical than muscularly imperial in nature. Of course, the centrality of the British Army at tattoos sanitized the Empire and allowed for the erasure of imperial violence perpetrated by the British Indian Army and other colonial auxiliary units.

¹⁰ Billie Melman, *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past, 1800-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7.

¹¹ *The Guardian*, July 6, 1935.

¹² *The Times*, August 1, 1933.

¹³ *Ibid*, August 2, 1933, August 1, 1934, July 28, 1937, and July 27, 1938. For “The Modern Circus” scene, tanks were “dressed up” to resemble elephants and horses.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, July 6, 1935.

Military tattoos in the interwar period displayed selective memory in creating national (and imperial) feeling by means of an intense focus on the local. Indeed, tattoos literally planted the Empire into English soil and blurred the line separating the metropole both temporally and spatially from the periphery. In justifying the Aldershot Tattoo, *The Times* suggested that the army had revived “the “multi-local” stage of the medieval and Elizabethan theatres.” Rushmoor Arena could “become any place that is desired” and could manipulate time and space.¹⁵ The Aldershot Tattoo of 1938, for example, brought “right into the heart of southern England the wildly picturesque spirit of the Highlands.”¹⁶ In *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918*, Alon Confino shows how the German concept and image of the *heimat* helped smooth over historical divisions and tensions after German unification in 1871. A focus on the local and picturesque along with a selective public memory helped to paper over the historical divisions that separated Swabians from Prussians.¹⁷ Some of the same difficulties confronted organizers of the interwar military tattoos at Wembley, Aldershot, Tidworth, and elsewhere in regard to the First World War and the representation of the Army in Britain's imperial and national history. An editorial in *The Times* suggested that the 1934 Aldershot Tattoo would remind veterans of the Great War that life in the Army was “after all the disillusionings and even the mockery, still spiritually sound and true.” Organizers of the show chose “grace rather than the grimness” of battle due to “the selection that humane memory itself makes after the

¹⁵ Ibid, June 18, 1934.

¹⁶ Ibid, June 8, 1938.

¹⁷ Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 8.

conflicts are reconciled.”¹⁸

Jane Ethel Brooke, an American from Baltimore visiting England after her daughter's marriage to an English surgeon, provided a diary entry of her experience attending the Aldershot Tattoo in 1936. She and her party started out on a drive to Aldershot from the town of Bagshot on “a glorious sunny evening.” Two days from the summer solstice, plenty of sunshine awaited them when they arrived at nine o'clock. She and her party ate their suppers in the car before making their way to their seats in the stands. As nightfall descended, King Edward VIII, who knew how to make an entrance (and an exit, as time would tell), arrived in a motorcade. Shortly thereafter, at around ten o'clock, powerful searchlights opened up and illuminated the massive drill-ground far larger than the stadiums she was familiar with back home. The “magnificent spectacle began” and Mrs. Brooke clearly found the pageantry captivating:

I cannot describe the sight of between three and four thousand men in the war-time trappings of the twelfth to the twentieth centuries, with massed bands and bagpipes, in the most thrilling exhibition of drills, battles and pageantry, with background of ancient castles, French villages, ancient war vessels and East Indian stockades. [. . .] During the whole performance the bands played martial music most wonderfully. [. . .] It was over at midnight, with the whole enormous field-space filled with straight lines of the multi-coloured trappings and the cavalry bands on gorgeously canopied horses, athletes in their garb, Scotties [sic] in their kilts, and all of them and the multitude singing “God Save the King.” [. . .] I could hardly bear a scene where the Scots under Bruce met the English on the field and Bruce with his battleaxe slew an English knight, riding at him with his lance pointed at his heart.¹⁹

Mrs. Brooke's description indicates the sheer breadth of the Aldershot Tattoo, not just in its use of physical space on the drill ground, but also in its use of light, color, sound, imagery,

¹⁸ *The Times*, June 20, 1934.

¹⁹ Diary Entry, Jane Ethel Brooke, June 18, 1936. Diary courtesy of her grandson, Mr. Robert Graham.

and history. The Scottish elements on display stand out, with bagpipes, kilts, and the “Scots under Bruce” featuring prominently. Being the junior partners with the English in sharing ownership of the concept of “Britishness,” the depiction of English armies in battle with Scots always represented the least overt representation of imperialistic aggression or nationalistic animosity.²⁰ The most divisive aspects of the recent and distant past were typically glossed over as best as possible. For the Coronation Tattoo at Aldershot in 1937, organizers decided to feature a display of Charles I's army instead of Cromwell's New Model Army.²¹ Cromwell's offenses apparently outweighed Charles I's in this context. The Aldershot Tattoo of 1938 displayed the meeting between King Henry VIII and Francis I on the Field of the Cloth of Gold, which served to solidify peace (however brief) between France and England after hundreds of years of conflict. Coupled with a display showing British forces graciously allowing Spanish forces to march out of Fort Mouro during the Seven Years War with the “honors of war,” the 1938 Aldershot Tattoo served as a fairly on the nose public justification for appeasement and Anglo-French cooperation.²²

“Something higher than mere entertainment:” Military Tattoos and Community

The intense nationalism inspired by the First World War placed the British Army in an anomalous position. Correlli Barnett argued that quickly after the end of the Great War, “the brief union of army and nation after three centuries was already over. Once again the army lay outside the mainstream of the nation's life and thought.”²³ Indeed, “the very existence of

²⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 131.

²¹ *The Times*, December 15, 1936.

²² *Ibid*, June 8, 1938.

²³ Correlli Barnett, *Britain and Her Army: A Military, Political and Social History of the British Army, 1509-1970* (London: Cassel and Co., 2000), 410.

even a comatose army seemed indecent to public opinion in the 1920s and 1930s, in the prevailing pacifistic climate of belief in disarmament and the League of Nations.”²⁴ The popularity of the military tattoo during this time period suggests otherwise. In addition, the public perception of the British soldier had changed as a result of the Great War. Scott Hughes Myerly has suggested that after World War One, martial display became “much reduced, less imposing, and more subtle in its impact. In modern war, machines have increasingly displaced dress as the show's focal point, and soldiers have become attendants for the terrible machines of death.”²⁵ In fact, according to most accounts *during* the interwar period, displays became larger, more elaborate, and increasingly direct. Queen Victoria was noted for describing the first Torchlight Tattoo at Aldershot in 1894 as a “pretty shoddy” affair, but by 1934 the Searchlight Tattoo at Aldershot had grown into something spectacular.²⁶ These interwar displays did not depict soldiers as “attendants for the terrible machines of death.” Instead, they emphasized the eternally heroic qualities of Tommy Atkins and his tragic victimhood in the trenches.

According to Mark Girouard, “chivalry died” in the trenches and “never recovered as a dominant code of conduct.”²⁷ Yet the Aldershot Tattoos of 1928 and 1929 featured shows devoted to the themes of “The Crusade” and “Chivalry” respectively. In 1928, soldiers passed through the “Menin Gate” in Rushmoor Arena, representing “the same dogged, imperturbable, waggish breed which converts a banal music-hall ditty into a national anthem

²⁴ Ibid, 411.

²⁵ Myerly, *British Military Spectacle*, 281.

²⁶ *The Times*, June 18, 1934.

²⁷ Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 290.

and finds food for mirth in its own mishaps.”²⁸ *The Times* provided an account of the “1914” scene at the 1929 Aldershot Tattoo:

No grim details of war are portrayed within the arena and, except for the shadowy marching troops, the suggestions of battle lie a long way off – 11 years away. Only the intimate knowledge of war which still exists could invest the scene with horror; but the poetry of the symbolism precludes horror, forbids anguish, and awakens only satisfaction that Britain, despite the cost, did not relinquish her heritage of chivalry.²⁹

This does not, however, mean that Girouard's assessment of chivalry is wrong. After all, this could represent a desperate attempt to revivify a dying “code of conduct” as much as it can represent its flourishing. In addition, many spectators did not take such representations seriously, seeing them as mawkish or comic. A Special Correspondent for *The Times* was shocked by the “insensitiveness of that section of the audience that regularly laughs at the representation of dead and dying soldiery.”³⁰ Still, even *The Guardian*, which was consistently critical of the “vulgar” use of hymns and the romanticization of the past, admitted that the silence of the “1914” scene at the 1929 Aldershot Tattoo “made all our mood of romantic sentiment, invoked by sound and sight, seem the hollow and dangerous sham that it was.”³¹ The tattoos at Aldershot and elsewhere moved between solemn earnestness and lighthearted fun, both intentionally and unintentionally.

The producers of military tattoos presented the soldier not as a mere cog in a machine, but as an individual representative of the highest values of Englishness or Britishness. Myerly argues that military spectacle in the nineteenth century advertised “a paradigm for social and institutional organization and discipline” and that the fundamental “meaning” of

²⁸ *The Times*, June 20, 1928.

²⁹ *Ibid*, June 19, 1929.

³⁰ *Ibid*, June 18, 1934.

³¹ *The Guardian*, June 19, 1929.

military spectacle remained the same even into the twentieth century. The use of military spectacle helped in “the imposition of social control on civilian society” and spread “servile values throughout British society.”³² To what extent nineteenth century army spectacle was “a management tool” of the state that helped to reconcile the British people to the needs of industrial capitalism and the “existing power structure” is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but this claim is much harder to support when looking at the interwar period.³³ Myerly tends to emphasize the control those in power had over the message and reception of military spectacle. Those who wielded power – meaning those both responsible for the production of the shows and the coverage of it in the press – were quite different people. No single person or group had the means by which to create and execute a program possible of producing anything resembling “social control.” Power was fractured, and instead of a site of social or cultural imposition, the tattoos of the interwar period operated more as sites of a more or less healthy cultural discourse on the trade-offs concerning long-standing values such as discipline, individualism, sacrifice, and honor.³⁴

The French philosopher Guy Debord claimed that, under the conditions of advanced capitalism, festivals like tattoos only brought “disillusion” to “a society where neither community nor luxury exists.”³⁵ The history of the interwar military tattoos supports a more prosaic, even optimistic reality. While much of the togetherness, solemnity, and enthusiasm

³² Myerly, ““The Eye Must Entrap the Mind,” 120; Myerly, *British Military Spectacle*, 12.

³³ Myerly, *British Military Spectacle*, 161, 168.

³⁴ One possible means to support Myerly's thesis would be to adopt a more determinist theory of history. Guy Debord, for example, argued that decaying capitalist societies provide “an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.” These spectacles served to justify the existing system and integrate the worker into society. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 12.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 113.

expressed at these tattoos might have been exaggerated or fake, to assert that they prove anything other than some sort of sense of community begs a question about whether we could ever *truly* identify a verifiable historical example of such a thing as a “sense of community.” In 1938, a letter to the editor in *The Times* described how the collective singing of “Abide with Me” to end the show at Rushmoor in 1925 helped to “heal” people at a time when “the wounds” from the Great War were still fresh.³⁶ In 1928, *The Times* claimed it had always been “the spiritual aspect of the tattoos” that had held “the widest appeal.”³⁷ As *The Guardian* put it, “whatever may be said in criticism of tattoos, they undoubtedly stir popular feeling to its depths.”³⁸ The music at Aldershot, according to *The Times*, contributed to “a sense of awe and reverence which converts the Tattoo into something higher than mere entertainment.”³⁹ This does not mean, however, that these spectacles simply served as “a mobilization of bias” in service of a ruling elite, as suggested by the sociologist Steven Lukes.⁴⁰ Instead of these spectacles representing “the opposite of dialogue,” in Guy Debord's words, or a one-sided manipulation, as claimed by Lukes, the historical evidence suggests that military tattoos exhibited a decentered site of discourse that divided and united Britons according to preexisting and ever fluid fissures.⁴¹

“The ideal of the Army is not war:” The Englishness of Military Tattoos

Adolf Hitler's coming to power in 1933 represented the key inflection point of the

³⁶ *The Times*, June 1, 1938.

³⁷ *Ibid*, June 8, 1928.

³⁸ *The Guardian*, June 30, 1937.

³⁹ *The Times*, June 9, 1927.

⁴⁰ Steven Lukes, “Political Ritual and Social Integration.” *Sociology* 9 (May 1975), 289.

⁴¹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 17.

1930s. For those still holding on to hope that the “Great War had abolished war,” Hitler's coming to power showed just how much remained unsettled.⁴² Hitler, making good on his years of anti-Versailles rhetoric, abruptly pulled Germany out of the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva just ten months after coming to power. The high-minded talks in Geneva produced high hopes, but the fall from those Alpine heights was shockingly precipitous for many pacifists.⁴³ Hitler's accession also helped to give a new shape to the debates concerning military tattoos. As discussed earlier, tattoos had already faced criticism from pacifists and anti-militarists, but the public debates over their militaristic nature became more internationally focused after 1933. While supporters had often claimed tattoos were antidotes to the collectivism of Bolshevism, the rise in Nazi Germany of a new collectivist, authoritarian regime with a proclivity toward militaristic spectacle created a new cudgel for anti-militarists to use in public debates over the holding of tattoos.

Military tattoos became sites of protest and reaction; physical spaces at which to register opposition to abstractions like fascism or militarism. In 1934, four anti-fascist protesters were arrested at Aldershot for distributing political leaflets.⁴⁴ This was not the first time opponents of tattoos took the opportunity of handing out leaflets, but the coming to power of the Nazi Party altered the substance of these leaflets. For example, the No More

⁴² Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 3, 123. Ceadel distinguishes *pacifism* from *pacifism*. For Ceadel, the former refers to someone who opposes all war, regardless of the circumstances. A *pacifist* believes that war is sometimes necessary, but that it is “always an irrational and inhumane way to solve disputes.” Ceadel notes that most pacifists wavered between *pacifism* and the bolder stance of *pacifism*. This dissertation will use the term *pacifist* to refer to both groups for simplicity's sake.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 108.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, June 19, 1934.

War Movement, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Society of Friends and other pacifist organizations all passed out generic warnings about the dangers of militarism at the Leeds Tattoo in 1932, but leaflets after 1933 issued more specific warnings about the rise of Nazism.⁴⁵ David Grenfell, Labour MP and outspoken critic of militarism, expressed his concerns that tattoos would “incite militarist feeling” during a precarious time in world affairs. In an editorial, *The Times* responded to Grenfell's speech by wondering whether he meant it would incite “militarist feeling” abroad or at home.⁴⁶ The Leeds City Council voted against holding a tattoo in 1934, suggesting they could not, given the current climate, let anyone on the continent think the British were militaristic.⁴⁷ This fear was hardly universal, and Nottingham quickly voted to hold the tattoo that Leeds refused to hold.⁴⁸ The rise of more overtly militaristic and brazenly aggressive military displays in Nazi Germany forced supporters of tattoos in Britain to respond to comparisons. This also allowed them, however, the opportunity to justify tattoos by pointing to some of the real differences between Nazi and British versions of military spectacle.

The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* published an article justifying the Aldershot Tattoo in the face of criticism that it was dangerously contributing to the rise of militarism in Europe: “Unlike vaguely similar events abroad, the Aldershot Tattoo has no essentially State origin and serves no propagandist purpose: it does not preach, nor consciously endeavor to stir the audience in one direction. The spectators do not leave

⁴⁵ Ibid, July 1, 1932.

⁴⁶ Ibid, May 21, 1935.

⁴⁷ *The Guardian*, December 6, 1934.

⁴⁸ Ibid, December 7, 1934.

Rushmoor charged with arrogant nationalism or bombastic militarist notions.”⁴⁹ This is a remarkably disingenuous defense for a few reasons. One, the British Army, an organ of the British state if there ever was one, produced the Aldershot Tattoo. Two, the belief that the elaborate shows at Aldershot did not “consciously endeavor to stir the audience in one direction” strains credulity. Supporters of tattoos exhibited a sort of doublespeak throughout the interwar period. Like a modern-day political comedian hiding behind his role as a funnyman when asked to defend a political position, supporters often refuted claims of militarism by poo-pooing the significance of tattoos altogether. In 1935, the Financial Secretary to the War Office responded to charges of militarism leveled by Grenfell in the House of Commons by claiming the Aldershot Tattoo was “simply a piece of beautiful and interesting pageantry that has no connexion at all with the militarism which he [Grenfell] suggests.”⁵⁰ In a debate at the Bradford City Council over the holding of a local tattoo, Lieutenant-Colonel A. Gadie admitted that the tattoo would be educational, but that it “would not depict warfare at all, and there was no question of recruiting.”⁵¹ In a House of Commons debate with Secretary of War Shaw in 1930, however, MP Herwald Ramsbotham voiced his support for holding a tattoo in Lancashire by referring to the Army's opinion that tattoos stimulated recruitment.⁵² In 1937, *The Times* suggested that the Aldershot Tattoo did not have “any official relation to public policy,” but that it did provide a good advertisement of a soldier's life.⁵³ Perhaps General Sir Alexander Wardrop, C-in-C Northern Command, best

⁴⁹ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 13, 1935.

⁵⁰ *The Times*, May 24, 1935.

⁵¹ *The Guardian*, September 12, 1928.

⁵² *HC Deb 08 July 1930 vol 241 cc389-94*.

⁵³ *The Times*, June 21, 1937.

illustrated the disingenuousness of the Army when he explained how the Ravensworth Tattoo did not make recruiting an objective: “There are no recruiting sergeants waiting at the street corners in Newcastle and Gateshead, but at the same time we are issuing a leaflet which sets forth the reasons why young men should join the army, and we hope that recruits will be attracted by our tattoo.”⁵⁴ An internal memo at the War Office concerning the production of news reels of Aldershot, however, makes the propagandistic purposes of the Aldershot Tattoo quite clear:

Not only does the Army need popularising for home consumption, but it is also necessary from a national prestige point of view that these News Reels should be shown abroad – in every part of the world - [. . .] I have always felt that we get far less publicity than do the other Services [. . .] the general public would certainly be very disappointed if deprived of the opportunity of seeing on the screen what they were unable to witness in reality.⁵⁵

The British Army saw the need to put on shows like Aldershot for purposes of national prestige, but it also felt compelled to fight for domestic popularity at a time when each military service was competing for a greater share of a limited pool of financial resources and a greater share of recruits in a country without conscription.

Even without explicitly recruiting, organizers of military tattoos clearly embraced opportunities to expose as many children as possible to the spectacle on display. The message would be clear to any child in attendance: these men are impressive, even heroic; care to join them? Schoolchildren often attended dress rehearsals at tattoos for free. This led to a public debate in many city councils over their educational purpose. In 1934, the Durham County

⁵⁴ *The Guardian*, July 1, 1936.

⁵⁵ WO 32/3020.

Education Committee decided to not allow school parties to attend rehearsals for the Ravensworth Tattoo.⁵⁶ At the London City Council in 1936, critics claimed Aldershot “Hitlerized” youth and voted in March to prohibit children from going to the RAF Display and the Aldershot Tattoo or any shows of “a militarist character.”⁵⁷ Winston Churchill would criticize the London City Council's decision the next year, pointing out that the London City Council was controlled by Socialists. An editorial published in *The Times* attacked the London City Council for exhibiting “priggishness,” bemoaning that “Europe may arm and the children of Europe may have their thoughts constantly directed to the next war; but the London child, so far from being instructed in the facts and helped to form a balanced judgment, is led to believe that war belongs to bad days gone by.”⁵⁸ This defense does have some merit, but to claim that Aldershot simply presented the “facts” was absurd. Producers at Aldershot devoted entire shows to the quite explicitly ideological justification of the virtues of “discipline” or “chivalry” and the defense of “the crusade” and “empire.” The Official Programme for the 1929 Aldershot Tattoo claimed that while the Tattoo “aims to interest, it aims also to instruct, to illustrate the growth of an altruism, which began with the Christian religion.”⁵⁹ The London City Council held another vote to rescind the ban on children attending rehearsals of military displays in June. It narrowly failed, but the vote does show how even in the Labour dominated London City Council, military displays produced mixed feelings.

Both supporters and critics of military tattoos claimed at times to stand for

⁵⁶ *The Guardian*, May 31, 1934.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, June 25, 1936.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, March 4, 1937.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, June 19, 1929.

individualism. This shows the strength of the British attachment to the language of classical liberalism, for it persisted into an increasingly collectivist age and survived the Great War, which, as John Gillis has suggested, seemingly “consigned individual heroism to oblivion.”⁶⁰ Indeed, producers of military tattoos struggled to present the British soldier as anything other than a tragic victim; heroic for his sacrifice, but rarely individualized in that sacrifice. Nameless soldiers marched through a model of the Menin Gate and into distant battlefields – not towards any discernible victory, but to a concluding scene that usually included a field dotted with crosses and covered in poppies. This is, at best, the visual equivalent of the Georgian lines of Brooke: “That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England.” It is romantic, it is patriotic, but the poem is still about a soldier's death and the honor of individual sublimation into the national whole. Myerly argues that military spectacle helped to model a disciplined machine for society that promoted hierarchy, conformity, and order.⁶¹ Soldiers were “mere tools with no independent will of their own.”⁶² The tattoos at Aldershot and elsewhere undeniably modeled collective action, discipline, order, and solidarity, but supporters of tattoos felt compelled to defend tattoos in the name of individualism as well. While critics on the left often opposed tattoos because of fears of militarism swamping the individual's interests, supporters suggested that opposition to tattoos originated in a left-wing materialism that denied the possibility of individual heroism. *The Times* suggested that the 1925 Wembley Tattoo featured “parables rather – of discipline,

⁶⁰ John Gillis, “Introduction,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, edited by John Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11.

⁶¹ Myerly, *British Military Spectacle*, 152.

⁶² *Ibid*, 74.

purpose, and common action, and of the place and dignity of the individual in a system.”⁶³

The *Surrey Mirror Country Post* argued that the Aldershot Tattoo “makes a particular appeal to the individual.”⁶⁴ An editorial in the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* in support of holding a tattoo in Leeds criticized the notion that military “spectacles are a prelude to the spirit of annihilating militarism.” The editorial expressed gratitude that the English people did not listen to “ultra-modern types with all their hatred of patriotism and individualism.”⁶⁵

Writing at the time, Malcolm Muggeridge, among others, noted that the British people had become collectivist since the First World War.⁶⁶ Indeed, Samuel Beer has called the interwar period “the Collectivist Age.” While the liberalism of the left was slowly being swamped by the collectivism of Labour, Tories like Harold Macmillan sought to resurrect the “organic conception of society which was the distinct contribution of medieval thought” as a counterweight to “individualism and *laissez-faire*.”⁶⁷ It is no surprise, then, that mass displays of collective action reached some place deep in the British psyche during the interwar years. For tattoos to have been as popular as they were, the underlying worldview they presented must have been consistent with the widespread tendencies of the era. Still, the strength of the language of individualism remained too strong to abandon in the rhetorical fight over militarism.

In 1938, an editorial in *The Times* assessed the impact of the Aldershot Tattoo since its resurrection after the Great War. The editorial asserted: “[. . .] however far mechanization

⁶³ *The Times*, September 7, 1925.

⁶⁴ *Surrey Mirror Country Post*, April 10, 1931.

⁶⁵ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, October 22, 1932.

⁶⁶ Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Thirties: 1930-1940 in Great Britain* (London: Collins, 1967), 15.

⁶⁷ Samuel Beer, *British Politics in the Collectivist Age* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966), 294.

may go, men are more than machines. [. . .] If there are lands where the ambitions of soldiers would urge their countrymen to war, England is not one of them.”⁶⁸ Supporters of tattoos often pointed to the differences between ordinary British soldiers and soldiers elsewhere – despite the superficial similarities one might find with the use of drill or searchlight or music at displays at Aldershot and Nuremberg, a British soldier could never be a German soldier. “The ideal of the Army is not war,” *The Times* would argue, “nor are wars made by soldiers – at any rate by British soldiers.”⁶⁹ The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* welcomed foreigners to watch the Aldershot Tattoo and catch a glimpse “of the national character of the English. A visitor from abroad can see at Aldershot how our love of martial display is harmless and healthy, how its pomp is subservient to an inspiration. [. . .] The English like the picturesque and colourful, but it must be natural and an inherent part of the scene.”⁷⁰ Some supporters even attributed the invention of the torchlight to Germany, but nevertheless suggested that the British had “turned the Tattoo to more practical and beneficent account.”⁷¹ British tattoos were all about charity, after all. George Orwell suggested that “one rapid but fairly sure guide to the social atmosphere of a country is the parade-step of its army” and that “military display is only possible in countries where the common people dare not laugh at the army.”⁷² The British people did often laugh at their Army on display, but Orwell underestimated the popularity of military displays and the earnestness with which they were viewed by so many spectators.

⁶⁸ *The Times*, June 8, 1938.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, June 11, 1937.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, June 13, 1935.

⁷¹ 1370. Private Papers of F.H. Lawrence. Newspaper clipping from unknown newspaper, 1938. IWM.

⁷² George Orwell, “England Your England,” in *A Collection of Essays*, by George Orwell (New York: Harvest, 1981), 259.

Not only were military displays possible, they served an incredibly important role in interwar Britain, even if they were substantively different from similar displays in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. Susan Kingsley Kent has compared the rituals of remembrance in Nazi Germany and Britain after the Great War, noting their functional similarities.⁷³ Nevertheless, the differences between British and Nazi military displays seem even more significant.⁷⁴ In a rather straightforward sense, and especially at the Army's displays rather than the RAF's displays, these differences reflect the patriotism of the British displays versus the nationalism of the German displays. Of course, patriotism and nationalism have been defined in an almost infinite number of ways, and the scholarship on nationalism seems to never cease growing, but I am relying on the distinction Orwell makes between patriotism and nationalism. For Orwell, patriotism meant “devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life,” whereas the nationalist exhibited a “desire for power [. . .] for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.”⁷⁵ Kent argues that the British “sought to recreate a sense of wholeness, to resist the sensations of disruption, to fill in the gaps and erase the visions that threatened to tear them apart [through] the telling of a story, a narrative of history that connects past with present.”⁷⁶ The Nazis did not refrain from referencing romantic Germanic heroes from the past, but Nazi spectacle focused more on the creation of a nation organized around new, explicitly racial lines. Mass ceremonial and public

⁷³ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918-1931* (London: Palgrave, 2009), 6.

⁷⁴ For a source that provides an account of just how much modern Germany (both Imperial and Nazi Germany) borrowed from British traditions of military ritual, see Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*.

⁷⁵ George Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism,” in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* Vol. 3, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 361-362.

⁷⁶ Kent, *Aftershocks*, 6-7.

festival represented the “realization of a new political religion.”⁷⁷ Nazi public pageantry stressed the “functional and the modern,” according to Jan Rüger.⁷⁸ British military tattoos and Nazi military displays tended to stimulate nationalism from opposite ends. The latter sought to create this sense almost *ex nihilo* while the former sought to do so by linking the past with the present, the local with the national – the *patrie* writ large. British tattoos tended to ground themselves in a historical narrative and often in the local history of a specific regiment. An editorial in *The Times* in 1939 argued that the Aldershot Tattoo “was based on the soldier's first and noblest sentiment, the love of country. The very scene strikes that dominant note from the first, for the green acres of the arena, with the woods stretching into the shadowed distance, are utterly characteristic of England, as her image is carried over the four quarters of the globe in the imagination of her sons.”⁷⁹ This is the language of Brooke once more. Of course, this does not mean that British tattoos were not nationalistic, even in the Orwellian sense of the term. Many spectators at the time believed they presented a vision of history that glorified British power. Alison Light has argued that the interwar focus on life in the country represented an urge to recapture a sense of Englishness buried underneath the modern accretions of Britishness and Empire.⁸⁰ The military tattoos of this period, however, do not demonstrate this bifurcation of English countryside and British Empire; instead, they represent an attempt to squeeze them into the same space.

Rearmament and Military Tattoos in the Late 1930s

⁷⁷ George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 207.

⁷⁸ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 270.

⁷⁹ *The Times*, June 12, 1939.

⁸⁰ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), 8-9.

1935 was another turning point in the history of military spectacle at Aldershot.

According to John Walters:

Aldershot's Age of Splendour had its grand and unforgettable finale on Saturday, July 13, 1935, in the Royal Review in celebration of King George's Silver Jubilee [at Aldershot . . .]. Such "spectaculars" were in future only to be partially imitated *for the entertainment of the masses* in the Aldershot Tattoo and other army shows. [. . .] And after that tremendous day of the review the grandeur of Aldershot began to fade. The approach of the Second World War and the war itself changed it into a more serious place.⁸¹

The Royal Review in 1935, for Walters, represents the last time public spectacle focused on performing *for* the monarch, rather than the masses. This shift in function took place earlier in the interwar period, but Walters is not wrong to see a turning point after the two displays at Aldershot in the summer of 1935. The decision to move the Royal Review in 1935 from the traditional venue at Laffan's Plain to the Rushmoor Arena at Aldershot was a controversial one at the War Office. An internal memo justified the change by arguing that Laffan's Plain

was suitable for the Army before the Great War, but the Army to-day is so largely mechanized that it is difficult to convey a true impression of its modern character by the old method. In the old style of Review, the full dress, which the Army no longer possesses, was the making of a spectacle. One of the most important characteristics of a modern army is invisibility, to which end its clothing and equipment are designed.⁸²

The British Army struggled to maintain the traditional features and effects of military pageantry in the face of the realities of modern warfare. Horses and cavalry displays were almost universally praised at military tattoos even when little else was lauded by sneering critics. Producers sought every opportunity to maintain the horse's prominent place in military pageantry, but military reforms initiated out of necessity by the late 1930s made their

⁸¹ John Walters, *Aldershot Review* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1970), 222. The italics are my own.

⁸² WO 32/3014.

inclusion increasingly untenable. At the Tidworth Tattoo in 1932, for example, even though the local command was at the heart of the British Army's slow move towards mechanization, *The Times* congratulated producers for not forgetting “that the horse is the most graceful of all means of transport.”⁸³ In 1937, however, the new Secretary of State for War Leslie Hore-Belisha pushed forward with the full mechanization of the British Army under the guidance of the journalist and military expert Captain Basil Liddell Hart.⁸⁴ The effects manifested themselves at the tattoos in that same year. *The Times* expressed sadness at the end of the horse era at the Aldershot Tattoo in 1937.⁸⁵ The *Manchester Guardian* felt the “mock battle was the least satisfactory item,” hated the singing of “Abide with Me,” and regretted the lack of horses at the Leeds Tattoo in 1938.⁸⁶ Producers still did their best after 1937 to include horses in displays. In 1939, the Leeds Tattoo included the depiction of “A Frontier Incident” in India, which allowed them to depict cavalry in a modern combat situation. Even the cover of the Official Programme of the 1937 Aldershot Tattoo still showcased an illustration of a knight in shining armor on a horse.⁸⁷ The Aldershot Tattoo in 1939 featured a scene entitled, “Changing the Guard.” The scene depicted the old army symbolically handing over control of the nation's defenses to a modern, mechanized army.⁸⁸ Thus ended an era of spectacle. The tattoos of the late 1930s did not wane in their popularity, but questions of how sustainable this popularity was began to pick up in the years immediately leading up to 1939. The war's

⁸³ *The Times*, August 8, 1932.

⁸⁴ Barnett, *Britain and Her Army*, 420.

⁸⁵ *The Times*, August 2, 1937.

⁸⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, July 8, 1938.

⁸⁷ Copy # S.6/839. Shelf Mark: 43 (41).2/4-6. *1939 Northern Command Tattoo Programme*; Copy #: K. 57751. Shelf Mark: 43(41).3/4-8. *Programme of Coronation Tattoo, Aldershot, 1937*. IWM.

⁸⁸ *The Times*, January 10, 1939.

outbreak, however, made these concerns a rather moot point.

As the War Office memo quoted above illustrates, the very modernity of the British Army seemed to work against it in the production of impressive spectacle. In response to this memo and in opposition to the proposed move to Rushmoor, General Francis Gathorne-Hardy of Aldershot Command asserted: “the beauty of a Review is the great mass of troops, the shining bayonets, the advance in Review Order and the cheers for the King, and the general big spectacle. This is all absent on the Tattoo ground.” He would add in a memo a few days later that “a big spectacle is very desirable and it will be a matter of great regret if we are unable to have a parade on Laffan's Plain.” He feared, however, that the “big spectacle” was perhaps better done by the “modern” dictatorships who more fully embraced violence and bellicosity in their public displays.⁸⁹ As Philip Taylor has noted, “a liberal democracy with its own peculiar historical idiosyncrasies required different propaganda techniques than that of a dictatorship.”⁹⁰ Planners of the Royal Review in 1935 had to choose between presenting a massive army “with shining bayonets” on Laffan's Plain or a modern army in the more spectator-friendly Rushmoor Arena; between the imposing spectacle of a mass parade or the less glamorous, if more realistic, presentation of the “invisible” army in a “modern” arena. The decision to choose the latter is symbolic of a larger shift in the purpose of military display in general from acclamation in the Edwardian and Victorian period to justification and education after the Great War. The British Army, and the Royal Navy for that matter, had to be justified as a useful public expense in an age of mass politics and tight

⁸⁹ WO 32/3014.

⁹⁰ Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century*, 118.

budgets.

In 1936, *The Times* wondered how with dark days clearly ahead the Aldershot Tattoo would look ten years hence. Audiences seemed less and less willing to “suspend their disbelief in the reality” of the set piece battle presented each year. The article surmised that producers “with a necessarily restricted range of possibilities [. . .] must feel the difficulty of securing novelty.”⁹¹ An editorial a few days later observed that the Aldershot Tattoo seemed to be in a period of transition: “The armies of Mons and Ypres are armies no longer, and there is far more knowledge of the reality of war among the grey-haired civilians who watch from the shadows than among the young soldiers who march and countermarch about the great arena.”⁹² Tattoos had served as important sites of remembrance for the Great War. The use of the war and its meaning at tattoos, as has been recounted here, was disputed and contested, but the Great War gave the tattoos an undeniable emotional undercurrent during the interwar period that few denied. By the late 1930s, the generation born after the end of the Great War began to reach maturity. For others, the war receded into the more hazy reaches of distant memory. As the world appeared more and more to totter on the brink of another war, military tattoos entered a new period. This led to a growing compulsion in the last few years before the Second World War to reflect upon the purpose of the tattoo and assess its legacy as a massively popular phenomenon.

In 1938, *The Times* ran an article that admitted many people probably did not know the purpose of tattoos. While this article emphasized the importance of the charitable aspects

⁹¹ *The Times*, June 6, 1936.

⁹² *Ibid*, June 11, 1936.

of tattoos and how they saved the taxpayer money while bringing a community closer together, others chipped in with more grandiose justifications.⁹³ One letter to the editor referred back to the 1925 Aldershot Tattoo. The collective singing of hymns, he remembered, helped spectators mourn the losses of the Great War and heal from their wounds.⁹⁴ In an interview with *The Times*, Lieutenant General John Dill, Commander in Chief at Aldershot, thanked the press for making Aldershot such a popular event and suggested that the Tattoo was more than just a spectacle. *The Times* paraphrased Dill: “[Aldershot] had a certain usefulness in practical training, for many of its items helped towards the efficiency of those taking part in it. It reflected in some ways the spirit of the whole nation.”⁹⁵ Indeed, tattoos and reviews did provide the British Army with opportunities to test the mass coordination of a mechanized army. During the Royal Review of 1935, two tanks broke down during rehearsal and the task of training soldiers and tanks to keep the same time in march proved to be quite difficult.⁹⁶ The experience of dealing with high levels of traffic out of London towards Aldershot also helped authorities learn and plan for the evacuation of children from major urban areas at the outset of hostilities in 1939.⁹⁷

Already in 1938, observers began to wonder whether that year's Aldershot Tattoo might be the last. Commander in Chief of Southern Command (and later Field Marshal) Sir Archibald Wavell decided to cancel the Tidworth Tattoo in 1939 in order to prioritize the

⁹³ Ibid, May 28, 1938.

⁹⁴ *The Times*, June 1, 1938.

⁹⁵ Ibid, June 3, 1938.

⁹⁶ Ibid, July 12, 1935.

⁹⁷ Ibid, May 23, 1939.

reorganization of the Southern Command during a period of massive expansion.⁹⁸ The 1939 Aldershot Tattoo was the last of the interwar tattoos and the message centered on preparing for the coming conflict. As in previous years, producers decided to give the tattoo a name and subject. They decided upon “Drake's Drum,” which, according to legend, followed Sir Francis Drake around the world and was given by Drake to the British people with a promise that when the drum was beaten he would return to protect their island.⁹⁹ This title and some of the set pieces at the 1939 Aldershot Tattoo demonstrate a change of emphasis compared to past tattoos, but also the continued difficulties of separating the achievements of the Army from those of the Royal Navy. Sir Francis Drake was a sea captain perhaps most famous for his role in defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588. To give over an entire tattoo to the elaboration of a naval legend is, one might suggest, an odd thing for an army to do. During the tattoo, “The Death of Nelson” was also recited, adding a distinctly naval sound to the proceedings as well.¹⁰⁰ This mixed messaging was not new. As has already been argued, military tattoos had found it particularly difficult to represent the British Empire with the use of historical pieces devoted exclusively to accomplishments by the British Army. In 1939, however, the importance of crafting a message for the public that made clear the unique contributions and importance of a strong army had declined significantly. The British Army had already received its boost in funding and the British people had been firmly behind a

⁹⁸ Ibid, May 17, 1939. In March 1939, the British initiated a plan to double the Territorial army to twenty-six divisions. In April-May 1939, a limited form of conscription was reintroduced. For a highly critical account of British preparations immediately before the Second World War, see Barnett, *Britain and Her Army*, 410-423.

⁹⁹ Ibid, January 10, 1939.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, June 2, 1939.

general increase in defense spending since at least October 1938.¹⁰¹ The focus at the 1939 Aldershot Tattoo was to promote unity and prepare the British people for war – in this way, it was not only the last, but also the most warlike of them all.

“The London Set” and More: The Demography of Military Tattoos

An article in *The Manchester Guardian* separated spectators at the York Tattoo into three distinct camps: one, pacifists who hated it; two, “those who lean to peace but believe the Tattoo irrelevant as propaganda or who are simply won over by a joyous mixture of colour and noise; and three, those “who believe the Army holds civilisation together.”¹⁰² The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* provided four different categories of spectators mostly along party or ideological lines: Conservatives, who believed that war could not be abolished, so tattoos were needed for educational purposes and as a reminder of past sacrifices; Liberals, who supported tattoos for mostly the same reasons as Conservatives; Labour, who probably never saw tattoos and nevertheless thought they probably promoted militarism; and clerics, who opposed tattoos and believed that the world needed peace and social reform.¹⁰³ The claim that Labour Party members did not go to tattoos is an exaggeration and meant to be one. Indeed, the overall popularity of the interwar tattoos makes it exceedingly unlikely that the audience profile was anything other than broad-based and transcendent of party affiliation.

Attendance figures at Aldershot and elsewhere rose throughout the interwar period

¹⁰¹ George H. Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain, 1937-1975. Vol. 1* (New York: Random House, 1976), 10. This claim is taken from a poll in October 1938 asking 1,000 British adults, “In the present situation, do you favor increased expenditure on armaments?” 72% responded yes, 18% responded no, and 10% expressed no opinion.

¹⁰² *Manchester Guardian*, July 11, 1932.

¹⁰³ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, August 27, 1928.

with the former earning “world-wide popularity,” according to the *Surrey Mirror Country Post*. Before the First World War, the Aldershot Tattoo was little more than “a large family party [. . .]. [. . .] [T]he patrons of those days were purely local, for the motorcar had not become universal.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the role played by Aldershot in helping officials prepare for the mass evacuation of children at the beginning of the Second World War has been noted already, but Aldershot was both a beneficiary and stimulant of the rapid suburbanization of London during the interwar period. The 1920s and 1930s have often been associated with economic depression and decline – the unemployment lines and urban squalor of Orwell's Wigan Pier. As other scholars have pointed out, however, this has always only been one side of the coin. The interwar period also witnessed the growth of suburban London concurrent with the expansion of the “tube” system, the rise of an automobile culture, and a significant increase in leisure activities by a growing white-collar population. While wages stagnated overall in the 1920s, as David Edgerton points, out, the wage gap between skilled and unskilled labourers had diminished, which meant fewer people living in poverty compared to the pre-war years.¹⁰⁵ Economic depression was ultimately highly regionalized, with the majority of the population outside of areas like Scotland, the north of England, and Wales finding life increasingly agreeable.¹⁰⁶

In the wake of the huge success of the Wembley Tattoos, the Executive Committee of

¹⁰⁴ *Surrey Mirror Country Post*, May 27, 1927.

¹⁰⁵ Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 183, 209.

¹⁰⁶ Kenneth Morgan, *Twentieth Century Britain: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 36-37; Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 145, 181-184. For a particularly optimistic take on the interwar period, see Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: Britain between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009).

the Aldershot Tattoo made plans to expand the grounds and build new roads to provide better access.¹⁰⁷ Rushmoor Arena steadily increased the number it could accommodate. Before 1927, the stands at Rushmoor could accommodate around 50,000 spectators. After expanding the stands in 1926, this number jumped to 70,000 in 1927, eventually reaching 77,000 by 1936.¹⁰⁸ Rushmoor Arena was consistently sold out and a ticket to see the Aldershot Tattoo was one of the hottest items in Britain. The producers of the show continually fought an uphill battle to keep up with public demand. In 1936, for example, several thousand people who arrived without tickets were unable to gain admission.¹⁰⁹ Just as important as increasing capacity at the grounds was the task of managing traffic to and from the arena. Mrs. Brooke “wondered how on earth everyone would get away before morning; but the getting away was as efficiently managed as the going, and with no confusion or tooting of horns.”¹¹⁰ A quick rundown of the total number of attendees at Aldershot shows a steady increase only halted by the start of the Second World War. In 1927, 188,476 attended the Aldershot Tattoo over five nights. In 1929, this number jumped to 307,400 and in 1931 producers decided to add a sixth performance in response to demand. By 1939, 504,300 spectators watched the Tattoo at Aldershot.¹¹¹ Likewise, the Tidworth Tattoo demonstrated this same expansion and growth. Around 81,000 attended the Tidworth Tattoo in 1929. Seven years later, this figure had grown to 130,587 with around 30,000 typically attending the opening performance throughout this period.¹¹² Of course, many probably attended these shows more than once, but

¹⁰⁷ *The Times*, October 30, 1925.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, June 15, 1927 and June 8, 1936.

¹⁰⁹ *Surrey Mirror Country Post*, June 19, 1936.

¹¹⁰ Diary Entry, Jane Ethel Brooke, June 18, 1936.

¹¹¹ *The Times*, June 20, 1927, June 24, 1929, and June 19, 1939.

¹¹² *Ibid*, August 5, 1931; October 9, 1936.

the total number of British subjects exposed to tattoos at Aldershot, Tidworth, Ravensworth, York, and elsewhere during the interwar period must be counted in millions.

At best, these raw numbers only tell half the story about the significance of interwar tattoos. Yes, they were incredibly popular and coverage in newsreels and in the press exposed them to millions more, but the impact they had on viewers is obviously more difficult to assess. At the very least, however, the evidence suggests that Robert Graves and Ford Maddox Ford were quite wrong. Graves argued that anti-war and pacifist sentiment had diminished support for war memorials and celebrations of the war.¹¹³ The public ceremonials of the war were highly contested, but this never got in the way of their popularity. In adapting to public taste, producers of tattoos eventually settled upon an image of the Great War that satisfied most spectators. This image, shorn of any sense of glory, any dashing display of color or romantic derring-do, seemed to please well enough a broad swathe of the British people. Neither overtly militaristic nor pacifistic, and open to various interpretations and emotive responses, the soldier-as-victim-marching-forward-to-No-Man's-Land set piece so common at tattoos was as likely to elicit gratitude for sacrifice as it was disgust in the face of modern, industrialized warfare. Writing a few years after the Great War, Ford has Christopher Tietjens, an officer in the British Army during the First World War and the protagonist of the *Parade's End* tetralogy, declare: “*There will be no more parades... [. . .]* For there won't, there damn well won't... No more Hope, no more Glory, no more parades for you and me any more. Nor for the country... Nor for the world, I dare say... None... Gone... Na poo, finny!

¹¹³ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 204-205.

No... more... parades.”¹¹⁴ Some of the glory might have diminished, but the parades kept on going.

In *The Long Week-End*, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge describe the rising popularity of communal hiking to events like the Aldershot Tattoo and Navy Week among British youth.¹¹⁵ Tattoos undoubtedly made every effort to appeal to this segment of the population. Hardly relying upon the voluntarism of communal hiking, tattoos often helped to organize school field trips to rehearsals free of charge. These activities came under scrutiny, with many fearing the effects a tattoo would have on young minds. Still, the number of children able to attend these rehearsals reached into the hundreds of thousands. In 1932, 40,000 children attended the rehearsal at Aldershot. Two years later, 69,000 children attended. The Aldershot Tattoo admitted that it sought to educate children with these rehearsals, but just how much of the message was received and understood by children is unclear. At the 1929 rehearsal, for example, children did not understand they were supposed to cheer on Napoleon and salute French bravery during the reenactment of Waterloo.¹¹⁶ After all, the British and the French were now friends, but the expectations by the producers of a certain crowd reaction were often frustrated by spectators with minds of their own. Children were not the only ones to laugh at a scene not meant to be comical. At the Aldershot Tattoo in 1934, “the crowd roared with laughter when supposedly wounded men tried to crawl or stagger back to their own lines.”¹¹⁷ By 1930, the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* suggested that military spectacles

¹¹⁴ Ford Maddox Ford, *Parade's End* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2013), 273.

¹¹⁵ Graves and Hodge, *The Long Week-End*, 264.

¹¹⁶ *The Times*, June 14, 1929.

¹¹⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, June 18, 1934.

like those at Aldershot were beginning to be “regarded apathetically by the more youthful members of the community. Among those of maturer age, however, the enjoyment of warlike displays appears to be undiminished.”¹¹⁸ Apathetic or not, even more children were attending rehearsals and efforts to educate children via military tattoos did not abate.

Producers of military spectacle did not only target children. Less than fifteen miles separate Aldershot from Ascot, and the Aldershot Tattoo became a well-recognized part of the “London Season” for the “Ascot Set.”¹¹⁹ Members of the royal family often attended and the number of automobiles driven by those in attendance suggests an audience that skewed wealthy or at least middle-class.¹²⁰ Pageants, however, traditionally sought to bridge class divides, and the supporters and producers of tattoos sought to do just that. General Officer Commanding Northern Command Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Gathorne Hardy defended the York Tattoo, for example, by arguing that the young and people of all classes should be given the opportunity to participate in the celebration of their country.¹²¹ Major Astor, a member of Parliament, believed that the 1938 Aldershot Tattoo proved that the charges of militarism leveled at Aldershot were preposterous and that the spectacle helped bring all the classes together in a collective celebration of their Army and their country.¹²² The Northern Command Tattoo at Ravensworth in 1934 made its pitch quite clear in the official

¹¹⁸ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, August 26, 1930.

¹¹⁹ *The Times*, June 4, 1930.

¹²⁰ Sean O'Connell, “The Social and Cultural Impact of the Car in Interwar Britain” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Warwick, 1995), ix. In 1929, there were probably around a million cars in Great Britain. At the 1929 Aldershot Tattoo around 32,000 cars needed parking over five nights. If one assumes each car averaged at least two passengers including the driver, this comes out to 64,000 total or about 1/5 of those in attendance arriving by car over the five days. The percentage of car ownership at Aldershot by those in attendance is about four times the national percentage at the time. *The Times*, April 16, 1929.

¹²¹ *Manchester Guardian*, July 7, 1933.

¹²² *The Times*, June 3, 1938.

Programme. The Programme admitted its purpose was to raise pride “in one of the most distressed areas in the country” and suggested that “the youth of the Empire” needed to “take up the task of leading a disturbed world on to prosperity and happiness once again.”¹²³ Alderman J.B. Griffin, however, suggested that “the working-class people of the city [Nottingham] did not want” a tattoo held in their city. Not above the use of a pun, Griffin noted that many of them, after all, had been “indelibly tattooed with the marks of 1914-1918.”¹²⁴ The popularity of tattoos amongst the poor, however, seems hard to dispute. In 1937, displaying a classic example of Tory condescension, *The Times* described how the Army was proud of how so many poor people had sought admission to Aldershot that many thousands had to be turned away. On the other hand, Army officials feared that turning away so many poor people would make the poor upset and potentially unruly.¹²⁵ While the Aldershot Tattoo's demographics probably did not exactly mirror the demographics of Britain as a whole, a broad swathe of people nevertheless did attend these shows. More importantly, perhaps, is how both supporters and critics saw the youth and the working-class as the most important targets for the propaganda on display at Rushmoor and elsewhere.

Conclusion

Robert James has noted that “historians [. . .] have been rather reluctant to analyse the *meaning* of popular leisure for those consuming it.” Indeed, there is a very good reason for this reluctance as James admits there is “little direct access to working-class consumers’

¹²³ Copy# S.6/839. Shelf Mark: 43(41).2/4-6. *1934 Northern Command Tattoo Programme*, IWM.

¹²⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, January 8, 1935.

¹²⁵ *The Times*, June 2, 1937.

feelings.”¹²⁶ James nevertheless chooses to speculate on “the consumption of texts,” keeping in mind that “acts of consumption are highly complex.” “Films and literature,” James continues, “were never simply used as a media where messages presented in the narrative were passively received by an apathetic audience.”¹²⁷ Establishing the popularity of a film or a text or a tattoo is easier than providing an accurate account of how they were perceived and how they influenced consumers. What one can do, however, is work backward from the producer in order to have a better understanding of what consumers wanted. As John Storey has noted, “we must always keep in mind the dialectical play between agency and structure, between production and consumption.”¹²⁸ The producers of tattoos tweaked their shows over time in response to public demand and public criticism. In doing so, they ended up producing a show with enough punch to elicit some mirth and the occasional tear, but vague enough to be mostly inoffensive rather than didactic. Military tattoos did very little to educate the British people effectively about the last war or the war to come, but they did serve as a site of consensus-forming. This can help us understand what was a sort of lowest common denominator of public discourse in regards to displays of the national past, the Army, and warfare. Producers of tattoos found that there were trade-offs involved in presenting shows that sought to present to the audience an overly specific vision of any of the three in an effort to shape public opinion.

At the 1924 Aldershot Tattoo, producers staged a set piece entitled “The Battle of Polemarchy.” This scene simulated a battle with the Germans during the Great War and

¹²⁶ Robert James, *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste in Britain, 1930-1939: A Round of Cheap Diversions?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 2, 207.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹²⁸ Quoted in James, *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste in Britain*, 4.

sought to present an example of the type of combined arms cooperation between tanks, cavalry, and airplanes that won the war. *The Times* insisted that the scene provided a realistic interpretation of battle.¹²⁹ Likewise, the year before at Aldershot featured a set-piece entitled “Armipotence,” in which “Vulcan” appears and “forges a new sword, symbolical evidently of the development of military weapons.” The British Army then uses these weapons – tanks and motorized vehicles – to wipe out “savages” in native dress.¹³⁰ The Aldershot Tattoo in 1925 featured a set-piece entitled “Kanvasdorp,” in which tanks, artillery, and infantry overcame gas and air attacks. The battle was made up, but the semi-Flemish sounding name, the scenery, and the uniforms all suggested the Great War.¹³¹ The *Manchester Guardian* claimed that “soldiers who have so recently seen the real thing agreed that it was an excellent imitation.” The scene presented not “the trench warfare of 1914-1918, but the war of movement of the last months.”¹³²

This confident display of the British Army's prowess in overcoming the difficulties of modern warfare and *winning* the Great War stopped after the Wembley Tattoo of 1925. The Wembley Tattoo in 1925, as discussed in the first chapter, presented a stirring scene entitled, “The Soldiers of the King.” This scene showed soldiers straggling back from the front, many of them wounded, but still chipper enough to sing “Tipperary.” After being joined by soldiers of the past, the scene culminates in darkness with the searchlights shining upon a field of

¹²⁹ *The Times*, May 19, 1924. “Polemarch” is a Greek word meaning commander – a strong, muscular title for a prideful display of the British Army's tactical mastery of the field. Compare this title and “Armipotence” to the titles at later displays - “1914” and “Ypres,” for example.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, June 21, 1923.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, June 17, 1925.

¹³² *Manchester Guardian*, June 17, 1925.

poppies and the crowd singing “Abide with Me.”¹³³ This scene set the standard for set pieces on the Great War at tattoos for the rest of the interwar period. Subsequent tattoos focused on the trenches and the sacrifices in Flanders rather than the victories of the final stage of the war. In this way, military tattoos helped contribute to what Samuel Hynes, Brian Bond, and others have called the “myth” of the First World War. This myth was largely created by a succession of anti-war memoirs (Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves), novels (Erich Maria Remarque), anti-war poetry (Wilfred Owen), and plays (“Journey's End) appearing in the late 1920s. Refracted through the subsequent experiences of the Second World War and even the Vietnam War, it was then reinforced in popular culture by television series like the *The Blackadder Goes Forth* and plays/films like *Oh! What a Lovely War!*.¹³⁴ According to Samuel Hynes, this “myth” included “the emerging sense of the war as a machine and of all soldiers as its victims; the bitter conviction that the men in the trenches fought for no cause, in a war that could not be stopped.”¹³⁵ With a war fought by victims, Hynes argues, victory faded from the story as well – the war became “a long catastrophe, with neither significant action nor direction.”¹³⁶ The military tattoos of the era could never be described as “anti-war,” but “the myth” itself was not necessarily explicitly anti-war. Brian Bond has demonstrated how many of the most famous works of the late 1920s and early 1930s often perceived as being anti-war reveal a more ambiguous stance upon closer examination.¹³⁷ As Samuel Hynes has argued, the “myth” was and remains fundamentally “literary” and “ahistorical” in nature. It

¹³³ Ibid, August 24, 1925.

¹³⁴ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, 1-2. See also Hynes, *A War Imagined*.

¹³⁵ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 439.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 215.

¹³⁷ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, 28.

does not assert that the war was wrong so much as it is inexplicable.¹³⁸ This helps to explain the struggle organizers of military tattoos faced in situating an ahistorical literary scene into the Whiggish medium of pageantry. The Great War scene at the Wembley Tattoo in 1925 contributed to a key aspect of this “myth” at an early stage; namely, the glossing over of British victory in favor of a vision of the First World War centered on the experience in the trenches. Neither the war of movement in the latter stages of the war nor the war in the trenches represents the “true” experience of the war. What interwar tattoos and the history of the “myth” of the First World War illustrate, however, is that history is defined (rather than fabricated) by the present and that myths themselves have histories; these are the clichés of the historian, perhaps, but, then again, novelty is overrated.

Military historians like Brian Bond, Paddy Griffith, and Trevor Wilson have pushed back against this “myth,” emphasizing the impressive accomplishments of the British Expeditionary Force in winning the war. Brian Bond argues that “after a sluggish start and many slips, the “learning curve” had risen sharply from late 1917 to produce a war machine to which the enemy had no answer.”¹³⁹ Indeed, this was the very message the Army attempted to relay to the public early on at places like Aldershot, but the literary myth proved too hard to combat and a more nuanced appreciation of the BEF's achievements in the war would have to wait for the work of historians some sixty years later. The impact this scholarship has had

¹³⁸ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 455. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell makes a similar argument about the Great War being ahistorical. Whereas Hynes tends to analyze the “myth” and recognize how it can get in the way of our historical understanding, Fussell's more post-modern approach tends to affirm its inscrutability. Indeed, Fussell argues that modern literature itself derived from the inability of traditional language to accurately describe the First World War. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

¹³⁹ Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, 99.

on the broader public, however, is debatable. In 1994, Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson lamented that “Any notion that the English-speaking people fought the Great War for a valid purpose, and at the last displayed greater military competence than their adversaries, has yet to find a place in modern memory.”¹⁴⁰ It is not clear that much has changed

The Aldershot Tattoo in 1925 and the Birmingham Tattoo of 1926 help illustrate the difficulties of crafting a scene depicting the Army's performance during the First World War in an inspiring, victorious, and confidence-inducing manner. The *1925 Official Programme Aldershot Searchlight Tattoo* juxtaposed reenactments of Waterloo and a generic First World War battle:

[Waterloo will] remind us of days when battle was not an affair of chemistry and devilry, but was a contest governed by unwritten laws of chivalry, in which human gallantry and human fortitude were largely the deciding factors. [. . .] It was fought to rule, and at the end each – victor and vanquished – could and did admire the distinguishing qualities of the other. Thus in the picture of “Waterloo” spectators may admire the dash and élan which are so characteristic of our Allies as well as the fortitude which is just as typically British.¹⁴¹

By implication, then, the British won “an affair of chemistry and devilry” without the “laws of chivalry” governing the combat by winning the Great War. Spectators perhaps did not make this inference at the time, but the larger conflation of modern war with “devilry” and a lack of chivalry became commonplace. In addition, the *Official Programme of the Birmingham Torchlight Tattoo, 1926* described a scene in which “wave after wave” of khaki clad men “advance in their turn to victory.” While some viewers might have been inspired by the result, others might have been depressed by the need for “wave after wave” of soldiers.

¹⁴⁰ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson quoted in Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, 118.

¹⁴¹ Copy#: S.6/773. Shelf Mark: 43(41).2/4-6. *1925 Official Programme Aldershot Searchlight Tattoo*, IWM.

Why were so many waves needed, one might have asked. Again, there is no evidence to suggest how audiences received these particular performances, but these two examples do show how producers of tattoos did not have a clean slate to work with in producing propaganda. Controlling the message was difficult, and it is no surprise that eventually the will to present the Great War as a proud chapter in the British Army's history representing its mastery of modern offensive warfare collapsed as the War receded further into memory and the “myth” took its place.

Shortly after Nazi Germany capitulated in May 1945, *The Times* ran an editorial prompted by news of Rushmoor selling off equipment that reminisced about the Aldershot Tattoo and assessed its legacy. The piece noted the paradox that a “simulacrum of war” in retrospect symbolized “the very essence of the lost serenity of peace.” The Aldershot Tattoo, the editorial made sure to point out, was not propaganda; it romanticized, but it did not lie. Considering the destruction wrought upon Europe and the world by the chaining of insidiously effective propaganda to a genocidal and powerful state, this distinction is understandable if idiosyncratic. The Aldershot Tattoo, despite occasional protestations at the time and later, sought to shape public opinion using the apparatus of the state. The extent to which it succeeded is up for debate, but even this editorial did not doubt its influence on the minds of the British people both before and during the Second World War.¹⁴²

In 1939, the *Yorkshire Evening News Supplement and Souvenir to Northern Command Searchlight Tattoo* suggested that the British people “have never quite standardised our

¹⁴² *The Times*, June 12, 1945.

attitude to the soldier. In time of danger we pet him and praise him beyond his deserts or desires; in times of peace we are inclined to forget all about him – until next time.”¹⁴³ The popularity of the interwar tattoos do not demonstrate this forgetfulness, but they do demonstrate a people using the military for the “contradictory purposes” (“le peuple [. . .] utilise la guerre et les militaires à trois fins au moins, contradictoires”) referred to by Charles Péguy. The French people used military marches as occasions for “their curses and their moral, sentimental, public, oratorical, official, philanthropic, scientific, eloquent, learned, socialist, materialist, historical, syndicalist-revolutionary reprobation.” Péguy also noted, however, that the people demanded that the military serve as “a motive of inspiration” to remind them “that they have not lost the taste for adventures, when, finally, they are tired of being bored by the images of peace.”¹⁴⁴ The details are perhaps a little different in the case of British interwar military tattoos, but they undoubtedly served in a similar fashion as both sites of inspiration and reprobation.

¹⁴³ Copy#: [O]K92/307. Shelf mark: 43(41).2/4. *Yorkshire Evening News Supplement and Souvenir to Northern Command Searchlight Tattoo, 1939*, IWM. This description also sanitizes the Battle of Waterloo, which had its own share of horrors to match those of the First World War. For a comparison of the experience at Waterloo with that of the Somme, see John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, 117-289.

¹⁴⁴ Péguy, “Notre Patrie,” 320.

Chapter Three: The Nation and the Navy: Displaying Decline, 1918-1939

Indeed, for too many people the British Navy resembles in some sort the conception of God.

----*The Navy* (July 1937)

“The Navy, and everything it stood for,” according to historian Geoffrey Till, “epitomised the essential characteristics of “the island race” whose interests it defended.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, “the Navy, in many ways, *was* Britain.”¹ Yet, by the late 1930s, the Navy's national stature began to wane as the British began to prioritize expenditure on the Royal Air Force over the other two military services. The end of the Navy's dominant position in British defense planning represented a fundamental break with Britain's past and it happened not in the midst of war or even after the loss of a war. This chapter explores aspects of this break and considers why the Senior Service (the Royal Navy) lost the battle for funding. As Elizabeth Kier has argued, “doctrinal developments are best understood from a cultural perspective.”² The naval displays of the interwar period represent one of the most important means by which the British people came into contact with their Navy and with naval culture. These displays demonstrate the challenges facing naval propagandists in an altered post-war context that undermined some of the assumptions of the “Navy myth.” Producers of naval displays struggled to reassert the importance of naval power in a time of fierce inter-service rivalry for scarce funds. While attendance numbers

¹ Geoffrey Till, “Introduction: British Naval Thinking: A Contradiction in Terms?,” in *The Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in Memory of Bryan Ranft*, edited by Geoffrey Till (London: Routledge, 2006), 7.

² Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3.

suggest it could still produce crowd-pleasing shows, the Royal Navy ultimately failed to control its messaging at the major naval displays of the era. This goes some way toward explaining the political environment that shaped decisions by British policymakers regarding defense spending in the interwar period.

The Fleet in Review

On July 17, 1935, Rudyard Kipling, who died just five months later, wrote “The King and the Sea” for the occasion of the Silver Jubilee Fleet Review of King George V. The poem, as one scholar has put it, brought “together empire, monarchy and naval power in the heady and romantic language that had made Kipling famous before the war.”³ Ostensibly about the role the sea had played in defining the character of King George V (“the Sailor King”), the poem quite obviously uses the king as a stand-in for the nation. Kipling writes that the sea taught the king “to swallow rebuke in silence” and that if the king erred in his judgment, the “Ocean [was] waiting to betray him.”⁴ This was hardly a message that championed British seapower; instead, Kipling is speaking to the transitory nature of naval mastery and hoping that the British people had at least learned humility in their decline from prominence. The British people had been “schooled” by the sea, which had not “spared” them from harsh lessons. When compared to Kipling's more famous poem, “Recessional,” written almost forty years earlier in celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the change in verb tense is revealing; Kipling's beloved conditional use of “if” has been replaced by the simple past tense.⁵ Both poems speak to the fleeting nature of power, but rather than a

³ Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 267.

⁴ *The Times*, July 17, 1935.

⁵ “If, drunk with sight of power, we loose, / Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe, / Such boastings as the Gentiles use, / Or lesser breeds without the Law.”

message of battle-weary induced humility like “The King and the Sea,” “Recessional” is a poem about an empire still at its apex of power and peering over the abyss of decline; a decline faced by all empires, “lest we forget – lest we forget.”

Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee (1887) celebrations included the first modern royal fleet review, which established a precedent for all subsequent reviews. While the first recognized fleet review can be traced back to 1415 and King Henry V, those of the late nineteenth century and through the beginning of the First World War “emphasized less the disciplining of bodies and more the theatrical display of monarchical and national power.”⁶ In broader terms, the modern fleet review, which involved the assembling of the fleet in a spot of ocean in the solent between Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight known as Spithead, was one more ceremony, spectacle, and ritual to emerge during this period of “invention” to solemnize the monarchy.⁷ Patrick Ransome-Wallis identifies two primary, if more prosaic, reasons for the holding of fleet reviews: one, mobilization for war; two, the desire to demonstrate to “potential enemies or to friends, the naval strength of the nation.”⁸ While Jan Rüger is correct, for example, in asserting that the 1935 Silver Jubilee Fleet Review was greeted as a reaffirmation of the Royal Navy's role as “the repository of the spirit and the tradition” of Britain, he does not show how the Review fundamentally failed as a show of

⁶ H.P. Mead, “Great Naval Reviews,” *Royal United Services Institution Journal* 80 (Feb./Nov. 1935), 238-239; Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 17.

⁷ David Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual,” *The British Monarchy and the “Invention of Tradition,” c. 1820-1977*, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 108.

⁸ Patrick Ransome-Wallis, *The Royal Naval Reviews, 1935-1977* (London: Ian Allan), 6. Ransome-Wallis's work focuses on recounting the ships at each review. His work reflects the antiquarian approach Scott Hughes Myerly believes has traditionally crowded the field examining military spectacle. See Myerly, *British Military Spectacle*, 202.

national power.⁹ Royal fleet reviews, and naval displays in general, after the First World War fundamentally differed from their pre-war counterparts in their intent and perception. I am making a case for ceremonial discontinuity during this period contrary to assertions by Rüger. While Rüger notes the tensions involved in the resuscitation of pre-war rituals amidst the disillusionment of war, he nevertheless stresses a basic continuity; Rüger's inflection point is singular and situated in the late nineteenth century when the purpose of reviews changed from the “disciplining of crews” to the “public acclamation of the monarch.”¹⁰ In fact, a second inflection point and a third stage originate after the First World War. During the interwar period, fleet reviews and naval displays evolved from fairly straightforward displays of national, monarchical, and naval power into more complicated, politicized displays created by the post-war realities of naval/imperial decline, the development of the airplane, memories of the First World War, and fiscal austerity.¹¹

Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee Fleet Review in 1897, King Edward VII's Coronation Fleet Review in 1902, and King George V's Coronation Fleet Review in 1911 took place at the height of naval fervor prior to the First World War and during the peak of British naval power. These events were hugely popular, with crowds huddled along the banks to catch a glimpse of a fleet so massive that it made Spithead look like a bathtub filled with toy ships. The overwhelming takeaway from these reviews by most onlookers was awe, pride, and a sense of confidence in British naval power. Even when naval experts were able to spot weaknesses in the fleet, they still recognized that such perceptions were overwhelmed

⁹ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 267.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 20-21.

¹¹ Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual,” 105-106.

by the spectacle of such amassed power. The fleet assembled in 1897 represented British naval strength at its peak; from that date forward, the Royal Navy declined in relative power over the long term.¹² Due to increased competition from Germany, Japan, and even the United States, alongside the equalizing effect of the new *Dreadnought*-class battleship (1906), Britain's centuries long supremacy at sea was ineluctably waning. Nevertheless, Arthur Marder notes that while the 1902 review displayed a weaker fleet, it had the same intoxicating effect as the 1897 review; the review was “well calculated to stir the pulses of the most phlegmatic person.”¹³ This was a common refrain at the time; fleet reviews had the ability to overwhelm one's critical faculties. For example, *The Times* described the 1902 review as “a pageant almost too grand to be measured by the untrained eye of man.” Only nine years later the paper diminished this same review as being incomparable to the fleet review of 1911, which produced “bewildered amazement at the overwhelming magnitude” of the assembled fleet.¹⁴ Lord Charles Beresford, an Admiral and Member of Parliament who knew something about naval affairs, lamented that the 1911 review was so universally perceived as an awesome sight when the Royal Navy actually suffered from dangerous vulnerabilities.¹⁵ The pre-war reviews were highly effective at achieving the purpose of

¹² Rüger, 242; Arthur J. Marder, “The Origin of Popular Interest in the Royal Navy” *Royal United Services Institution* 82, (1937: February/November), 768. The *Dreadnought* helped to restart the race at a new starting line, so to speak, by making Britain's prior fleet obsolete. Rival powers like Germany and France still had to learn how to produce their own dreadnoughts, but Britain's previous numerical superiority became less significant. The Royal Navy's relative strength vis-à-vis its strategic rivals would reach a brief new peak after the First World War, but the 1930s saw the downward trajectory recommence with the emergence of Japanese, German, and Italian naval power. David French, *The British Way in Warfare, 1688-2000* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1990), 175.

¹³ Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 426.

¹⁴ *The Times*, August 18, 1902; *The Times*, June 24, 1911.

¹⁵ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 29 June 1911 vol 27 cc574-696.

demonstrating strength, even sometimes at the expense of the truth.

The overwhelming confidence and pride that the pre-war reviews instilled in the press and the general public alike can largely be attributed to Britain being at the end of a long period of unprecedented peace and prosperity; a peace and prosperity that many felt owed a great deal to the Royal Navy's supremacy. During this *Pax Britannica*, “global trade flourished, slavery and piracy were suppressed and liberalism was spread, all due to the supremacy of the Royal Navy which occupied a paramount position across the world's oceans.”¹⁶ The Royal Navy also enabled the use of force to conquer, displace, and subjugate native peoples around the world as well. Regardless, the Royal Navy stood as a symbol of strength and security. Concerning the 1911 review, the Liberal MP Joseph King, who opposed greater naval expenditure, admitted that while the average Briton would see the ships assembled as “merchants of death,” the spectacle would nevertheless stimulate a feeling of security that such “engines of death” were British.¹⁷ *The Times's* coverage of the 1911 Coronation Fleet Review is revealing in its unabashed glorification of power. The paper argued that the fleet review was the most important of all the celebrations that took place during the coronation: “The fleet is a symbol of all these things [empire, wealth, history, and constitution] and of much more, but besides being a symbol it is an over powering reality.” The fleet review grounded the rest of the royal ritual in substance with its display of “the latent and ever-ready power” of the fleet. Lost in this coverage was any thought that power was or could be provocative, nor was there much doubt about the fleet's power to preserve

¹⁶ Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy*, 45.

¹⁷ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 13 March 1911 vol 22 cc1877-999.

world peace. The paper observed that the fleet was so powerful, in fact, that war was the last thing that a spectator would even consider; an ironic observation considering the outbreak of war just three years later.¹⁸ This was not only the case with the 1911 review, nor was *The Times* the only paper so readily comforted by power. The *Portsmouth Evening News* argued that the review of the fleet was the most important of all the coronation ceremonies, because without the power it represented all of the rest of the coronation ceremonies would have “been little better than a puppet show.” It was “at once the symbol of power and the assurance of peace.”¹⁹ This connection, even equation, of naval power with peace was to be fundamentally disrupted by the horrors of the First World War. This is not to say that the Edwardian era represented a period of calm, peace, or certainty in general. The Boer War (1899-1902) brought several national inadequacies to light, but the Royal Navy had been spared its blushes, unlike the British Army.²⁰ The Boer War proved that the Royal Navy could not solve every problem on the imperial periphery, but the Great War provided a much more damning verdict: the Great War proved the Royal Navy could not completely isolate the imperial metropole from the sacrifices of modern, total war. This realization helps explain the different modes of expression found in fleet reviews before and after the First World War.

While fleet reviews after the First World War succeeded in instilling pride in the fleet and its traditions, they failed to instill confidence in the fleet's strength or even continued importance when compared to their pre-war counterparts. That post-war fleet reviews caused many to discuss the material progress of the fleet and its weaknesses was nothing new. What

¹⁸ *The Times*, June 24, 1911 and June 26, 1911.

¹⁹ *Portsmouth Evening News*, August 16, 1902.

²⁰ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 245-247

was new, however, was the shadow of war. The First World War had shattered some assumptions about modern naval warfare. People were more knowledgeable about what a powerful fleet would look like and they were also aware that a powerful fleet *had not prevented war*. In a discussion of the 1924 fleet review in the House of Commons, MP Godfrey Collins of the Scottish Liberal Party asserted, “We know that the British Navy, however powerful and however efficient, is not able to keep this country from war.”²¹ The equation between power and peace had been broken.

From a high point in 1918-1919 of £356 million, the Navy's budget declined to £52 million by 1923. Post-war disarmament was mainly pursued by means of the Geddes Axe and the 1921-1922 Washington Naval Conference. Immediately after the war, the Admiralty developed plans for a post-war Navy with annual estimates lower than the wartime high, but still hovering at around £171 million. This fleet never materialized, however, and the speed and severity of the budget cuts alarmed the Admiralty. The Washington Naval Conference represented a fundamental shift in British history. As Paul Kennedy noted, “for the first time for centuries the Royal Navy had declared itself content with mere parity rather than naval mastery; and it agreed to have its strength bound by international treaty rather than based upon a consideration of its own defence needs.” The Washington Conference established parity between the American and British fleets in terms of capital ships, a ten year “naval holiday” on the building of replacements, and limitations on their size.²² The British effectively abandoned the “two-power standard” established by the Admiralty at the time of

²¹ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 31 July 1924 vol 176 cc2292-397.

²² Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 275.

the Naval Defence Act (1889), which sought to ensure that the Royal Navy could be the match of the second and third largest navies combined.²³ The British government agreed to the limitations established at Washington out of fear of a costly naval arms race with the United States it knew it could not win. Britain's decision to abandon their alliance with Japan as a concession to secure American support for the agreement was perhaps just as significant. By abandoning the Japanese alliance, the British lost their protector in the Far East and invited the prospect of future Japanese hostility.²⁴ This meant the British government simultaneously chose to open up an entirely new theater of responsibility for British naval power in the Pacific while agreeing to limit the construction of new ships to compensate for this new strategic vulnerability. The path to the humiliating fall of Singapore and the sinking of the HMS *Repulse* and HMS *Prince of Wales* in December 1941 can, in large part, be traced to this decision.

It was not, however, only the comparative strength of potential rivals that had the British worried about maintaining naval supremacy. The Washington Conference also symbolizes the changing composition of government spending, which included a drastic decline in defense expenditure as a percentage of the annual budget. In 1913, 30% of public expenditure went to defense and 33% to social services. By 1933, only 10.5% went to defense and 46.6% went to social services.²⁵ Indeed, while much has been made of the Second World War's role in creating Britain's welfare state, welfare spending actually rose at

²³ Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 892.

²⁴ Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy*, 137.

²⁵ Kier, *Imagining War*, 114.

a higher rate in the interwar years than in the decades following the Second World War. As David Edgerton has argued, “The United Kingdom went to war in September 1939 with a welfare state already in place.”²⁶ In 1913-1914, the government spent £50 million pounds out of an overall budget of £197 million pounds on the Royal Navy. By 1932, the expenditure on the Royal Navy remained the same, but the overall budget had now reached £859 million pounds. This represents a nearly fivefold decline in naval spending as a percentage of the overall budget.²⁷ Gone were the Edwardian glory days of naval enthusiasm. Gone were the days of “We want eight and we won't wait.” Gone were the days in which the Royal Navy could call upon the government for funding and expect nearly any demands to be met. The “we want eight and we won't wait” campaign, a public campaign for the building of eight new dreadnoughts to counter an ambitious German shipbuilding program, succeeded in securing more funding for the Royal Navy and did so as part of the People's Budget of 1910. By the 1920s, however, naval spending and social welfare spending were increasingly becoming competitors. The changing politics of the era had forced naval spending down the pecking order.²⁸ For the first time in British history, Kennedy notes, “the attitude of the majority of the population in regard to improved social services – pensions, insurance, health, education, etc. - was to be the most influential factor of all in the success and failure of governments.”²⁹

The Royal Navy competed against social services for funding, but also against the other two armed services as well. The Royal Air Force secured its independence after the

²⁶ Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 237, 244.

²⁷ Davies, *The Isles*, 272.

²⁸ French, *The British Way in Warfare*, 179.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 271.

war, much to the chagrin of the Royal Navy and Army, and, in doing so, established a three-way battle for funding that saw the Royal Navy increasingly devalued in relation to the RAF. Indeed, the Navy began to come up against claims by air power enthusiasts like Air Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard and Brigadier-General P.R.C. Groves that air power had become “the predominant factor in all types of warfare.” A sub-committee of the Imperial War Cabinet as early as 1917 warned of a near future “when aerial operations with their devastation of enemy lands and the destruction of industrial and populous centres on a vast scale” would make naval operations “secondary and subordinate.”³⁰ Even officers within the Navy voiced harsh criticisms of a surface fleet, with Admiral William Reginald Hall suggesting that the battleships HMS *Nelson* and HMS *Rodney* would be “left entirely out of the picture” by the time of their completion. In the future, battles would be decided by attacks by “clouds of planes at dusk, early dawn or moonlight on the ships before they go to sea.”³¹

While all three armed services vied with each other for limited funds in the 1920s, it was only in the 1930s that the RAF began to displace the “Senior Service” as the most favored branch.³² Still, the language of “substitution” used by air power enthusiasts seemed too dangerous not to confront.³³ “Substitution” refers to the argument that air power could be used to replace certain, if not all, functions performed by a traditional surface fleet. William Joynson-Hicks, the Home Secretary from 1924-1929, argued that “the Navy and Army will almost certainly be impotent spectators of an air battle or series of battles which will

³⁰ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 281.

³¹ Ibid, 282. The *Nelson* and *Rodney* were ordered in 1922.

³² Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, 51-52.

³³ Geoffrey Till, *Air Power and the Royal Navy: A Historical Survey* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1979), 192-193.

determine the issue by the destruction of the enemy capital before even the older Services can get into operation.”³⁴ Sir Archibald Sinclair, a future Secretary of State for Air, declared in a debate in the House of Commons in 1925:

[. . .] it is quite possible for our industries to be entirely deranged, our great cities to be shattered by incendiary and high explosive bombs, our people demoralised by incessant bombardments and the terrors of gas, and reduced to the verge of starvation by the destruction of communications, our Government paralyzed, and all this while the Navy still holds command of the seas, and yet is incapable of firing a shot in our defence.³⁵

Upon arriving at the Admiralty as First Sea Lord in 1933, Lord Chatfield decried the “pernicious propaganda against the Navy started in the Houses of Parliament and all over London” which put forth that the Navy “was an obsolete service! There was no more use for it! The future lay in the air!”³⁶ This was not mere paranoia; when Lord Chatfield made this statement, Brigadier-General Percy Robert Clifford (P.R.C.) Groves, the influential Secretary General of the Air League, was arguing that the Navy could no longer protect Britain or even its sea-borne commerce.³⁷

The first post-war fleet review in 1924 acknowledged these challenges, but also tried to redefine the Navy's place in the nation during a challenging time. The review revealed a greatly diminished fleet. The fleet in 1914 possessed 55 battleships; in 1924, it only possessed 10. The Royal Navy also seemed to be lagging in terms of technological progress. *The Times* observed that the fleet on review did not feature a single “vessel embodying the

³⁴ Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 138.

³⁵ Geoffrey Till, “The Strategic Interface: The Navy and the Air Force in the Defence of Britain,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 1, no. 2 (September 1978), 182.

³⁶ Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, 162.

³⁷ P.R.C. Groves, *Behind the Smoke Screen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 201.

many lessons learnt by, and the conclusions drawn from, the Great War.”³⁸ As a result, observers in the press tended to emphasize the “spirit” (“the spirit of Nelson”) of the fleet rather than its physical power; at their most euphemistic, they spoke of the fleet being in “transition.”³⁹ The second major fleet review of the interwar period, the Silver Jubilee Fleet Review in 1935 also caused many to comment on the Royal Navy's decline. *The Times* despondently observed that “the combined fleet at Spithead shows the striking shrinkage of the Navy as a whole since the War.” While it admitted that the fleet was still an imposing sight, the newspaper noted that “a professional eye” would realize that “the real strength of the Navy [. . .] has been whittled to the bone.”⁴⁰ The collected fleet, with its “coffin ships,” was such a disappointment to Winston Churchill that he responded by floating the idea of a “defence loan” to pay for a naval building program.⁴¹ In the House of Commons, Vice-Admiral Ernest Taylor declared that the review revealed the weakness of the Royal Navy, using the occasion to deliver a rousing speech on the importance of naval power.⁴² Deputy Cabinet Secretary Thomas Jones recorded Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's assessment of the review in a private letter: “Anyone who knew anything at the naval review the other

³⁸ *The Times*, July 26, 1924.

³⁹ *Portsmouth Evening News*, July 28, 1924.

⁴⁰ *The Times*, July 16, 1935.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, June 28, 1935. By this point, Churchill, the former First Lord of the Admiralty during the First World War, had become a vociferous supporter of defense spending on all of the armed forces. This had not always been the case. As a member of Liberal PM Asquith's Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade, Churchill advocated vigorous cuts in defense spending in order to finance the welfare measures of the “New Liberalism.” As Robert Crowcroft has argued, while Churchill maintained a lifelong fascination with war, enthusiasm for the empire, and belief in free trade, he otherwise exhibited little political consistency over the course of his long career. Of course, “consistency,” wrote Oscar Wilde, “is the hallmark of the unimaginative.” Crowcroft, *The End is Nigh*, 20-21.

⁴² *HC Deb 22 July 1935 vol 304 cc 1537*.

day,” said Baldwin, “could see they were all old junk.”⁴³ “The Silver Jubilee Fleet Review attempted to demonstrate the strength of the Royal Navy, yet it ended up doing quite the opposite. The showing was so lamentable that it caused Churchill to demand more naval funding and Kipling to wax poetic about the virtues of decline.

David Cannadine's discusses how the “text” of a ritual can stay the same while the meaning of the ritual evolves due to changes in the context in which that ritual is embedded.⁴⁴ Panic over the Royal Navy's weaknesses, especially in 1924, when Britain had no credible naval opponent of any strength, was rooted in the assumptions that had been shattered by the First World War as much as any *real* decline in British naval power. Military power is always relative, and in 1924 Britain possessed more military power vis-à-vis its potential rivals than before the war.⁴⁵ Indeed, this panic was as much rooted in a change in fundamental worldview as it was in any studied assessment of naval strength. The pre-war fleet reviews were brilliant at offering a picture of awe-inspiring power; power that was benign and an effective deterrent of war. It was such a powerful ritual that it tended to overwhelm even those who harbored some doubts about the Navy's strength at the time. After the First World War, observers could no longer revel in power being, as an article in *The Times* suggested, “The Moral of the Spectacle:” the power of the fleet, impressive as it surely was, had proven to be deceiving in both preventing war and winning one without almost unendurable duress. In fact, observers of the fleet reviews of the interwar period instead reveled in talking about the limits of the fleet's power. *The Times*, the same

⁴³ Crowcroft, *The End is Nigh*, 54.

⁴⁴ Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual,” 105-106.

⁴⁵ French, *The British Way in Warfare*, 175.

newspaper that in 1911 had facilely equated British naval strength with world peace, described the fleet anchored off Portsmouth in 1935 in quite different terms. The newspaper praised the fleet as “not the mightiest, but the noblest in composition.” This was a continuation of an increased focus on “the spirit” of the fleet, but *The Times* went even further. The newspaper also argued that the fleet's weakness was actually a positive; a stronger fleet could possibly provoke or intimidate a foreign power.⁴⁶ Gone were the days of an easy association of power with security. Despite the best efforts by organizers of the review to emphasize the Royal Navy's ties to the Empire and to global trade by the inclusion of merchant ships, fishing ships, and dominion ships, *The Times* still suggested that the review caused Britons to look inward.⁴⁷ Such an inward perspective, considering the important ideological linkages of the “Navy myth,” could only work against the Royal Navy. Public support for a strong navy depended upon an outward perspective; a perspective that understood the Empire and overseas trade as not simply something of interest, but of existential importance.

A writer in *The Naval Review* queried whether a naval display could be “staged still to stress the high character of the personnel, but at the same time to show the Public how poorly it is serving them with the means for performing their job?”⁴⁸ Indeed, this was the balance that had to be struck by all of the organizers of military displays in the interwar period. In an era defined by financial austerity and an inter-service competition for those limited funds, each branch of the military was cognizant of the need to nurture public opinion about the

⁴⁶ *The Times*, July 17, 1935.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, July 20, 1935.

⁴⁸ “Navy Week,” *The Naval Review* 23, no. 4 (Nov 1935), 733.

need for more funding. Before the First World War, the Royal Navy usually had its way. Kaiser Wilhelm's attempt to challenge the Royal Navy was defeated by the willingness of the British people (or at least the government) to seemingly support any amount of naval spending in order to maintain an uncontested supremacy.⁴⁹ During the interwar period, this was no longer the case. In the RAF's infancy as an independent service, Winston Churchill, as Secretary of State for Air, admitted that the branch would “grow, expand, and develop at the expense of – and to the advantage of the public – of both the other great services.”⁵⁰ The Royal Navy increasingly had to justify public support and this was reflected in their staging of fleet reviews. The Admiralty concerned itself with putting on a good show, but also making sure the show helped lead the public to a more specific understanding of the ritual than what had been expected before the First World War. Archival records show that the Admiralty became far more concerned during the interwar period with press outreach and what, in modern political jargon, might be called “message control.” In preparation for the Silver Jubilee Fleet Review in 1935, the Admiralty even hired a special officer “to get the best value out of the Review and to bring out its full significance [in order to achieve . . .] perfect co-operation with the Press and very thorough and smooth Press arrangements.”⁵¹ Admiralty records for the fleet review in 1935 suggest an organization desperate to use an opportunity to shape public opinion and “bring the Navy vividly before not only the people

⁴⁹ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 83-87. The political contest over the raising of funds for the People's Budget and the new naval spending centered not on *whether* to spend the money, but on how to raise the taxes to pay for it. Conservatives wanted to pay for it with tariffs while Liberals wanted to maintain free trade and impose income and excise taxes domestically. See Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 49.

⁵⁰ Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 140.

⁵¹ ADM 116/3015.

of this country, but of the Empire and indeed the world.” In fact, the admiralty was so concerned with “message control” that great care was given to make sure that the Belgian delegation was explicitly instructed on the right way to “read” the fleet review.⁵² The Diamond Jubilee Fleet Review of 1897 and the Coronation Fleet Review of 1902 indicate that producers were less concerned with managing the messages of the display for the public and more interested in the intrinsic importance of a ritual connected to the monarchy.⁵³ While Admiral John (“Jackie”) Fisher made a concerted effort to reach out to the press to promote a Fleet Review at Spithead in 1909, Fisher's nose for publicity was more the exception than the rule in the Royal Navy at the time.⁵⁴ The staggers of the pre-war reviews put on a performance “for the benefit of the few rather than the edification of the many.”⁵⁵ Their concern was more about putting on a good show of strength and letting the chips fall where they may with the general public. The pre-war reviews could afford to rely on spectacle to convey a feeling or cast of thought, while the interwar reviews felt the need to convey a far more specific message tailored to a more precarious time in the history of the Senior Service.

Navy Week.

Opportunities for naval spectacle did not depend on the death, coronation, or jubilee of a monarch during the interwar period. The Royal Navy held its first Navy Week at Portsmouth in 1927. Navy Weeks allowed the public to get an up-close view of their Navy.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ ADM 179/55; ADM 179/56. While it is always risky to make an argument rooted in a lack of documentary evidence (the Sherlockian “dog that didn't bark”), the lack of extant documentary evidence of press arrangements/correspondence and discussions of “message control” at least speaks to a lack of care about maintaining such records; an important point on its own merits.

⁵⁴ Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy*, 123.

⁵⁵ Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual,” 111.

Attendees could board ships, take in demonstrations of naval activities or mock battles, and watch the marines march in step to music on the parade ground. As the *Portsmouth Evening News* put it, “the silent British Navy [. . .] elected to be informative to the public.”⁵⁶ This decision, as Christopher Bell has noted, came with some reluctance, but Navy Week quickly evolved into an elaborate and sophisticated exercise in marketing the Royal Navy.⁵⁷ Navy Week represented a reactionary effort to steal away some of the public enthusiasm for displays by the Army at Aldershot and the RAF at Hendon, but archival records show how the Royal Navy more or less stumbled upon Navy Week as its solution.⁵⁸ “Navy Charities Week” at Portsmouth, later shortened to “Navy Week,” came about as a means to support the Trafalgar Orphan Fund. This Fund helped support different orphan houses throughout Great Britain and the three Home Ports (Portsmouth, Plymouth, and Nore/Chatham) took turns meeting the Navy's annual obligations. The means by which each port raised these funds, however, remained unsatisfactory. The Commander-in-Chief, Nore, complained that “the spectacle of the Navy annually appealing for funds by pageants, etc., for orphanages, which in some case do not really require the money, is becoming increasingly distasteful to all those who know the facts.” After the passing of the Widows', Orphans', and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act of 1925, the state began to give money directly to widows and orphans, making the need for orphan houses less dire.⁵⁹ Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, Admiral Osmond Brock, celebrated the legislation, suggesting that “it is natural and desirable that mothers

⁵⁶ *Portsmouth Evening News*, August 17, 1927.

⁵⁷ Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, 174.

⁵⁸ Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth to the Secretary of the Admiralty, February 7, 1927, ADM 116/2478.

⁵⁹ Commander-in-Chief, Nore to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 1927, ADM 116/2478.

should strive to keep their children.”⁶⁰

The Navy still had its financial obligations, however, and the Commanders-in-Chief at Plymouth and Nore were particularly adamant in their opposition to pageants, fêtes, or parades, with the former advocating a voluntary contribution scheme. This involved convincing sailors and officers to chip in part of their pay each year, saving the Navy from putting on “undignified” displays and canvassing British taxpayers for support.⁶¹ The Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, however, believed that the voluntary contributions scheme would not work. The “lower deck,” suggested Vice Admiral Bentinck in a report to the Secretary of the Admiralty, believed that “Naval Charities should be supported by the State, or by the Public, or at any rate not by the Navy.”⁶² Portsmouth also possessed a tradition of the “lower deck” organizing Flag Day celebrations and Trafalgar Day Pageants that helped to raise money for the Trafalgar Orphan Fund, which the C-in-C, Portsmouth did not want to stifle. Instead, the decision was made to channel it and, in doing so, “Navy Charities Week” was born. With the Admiralty's approval, the money raised by Portsmouth's Navy Week was not to go directly to the Trafalgar Orphan Fund, but to the Royal Naval Benevolent Trust. The Royal Naval Benevolent Trust Fund “originated out of the Grand Fleet Fund which was started in 1916, by the late Admiral of the Fleet, Earl Jellicoe.” After the Great War, realizing the importance of the Grand Fleet Fund, the Admiralty decided to create the Royal Naval Benevolent Trust, which was granted a Royal Charter of Corporation in

⁶⁰ Commander-in Chief, Portsmouth to the Secretary of the Admiralty, September 1927, ADM 116/2478.

⁶¹ Commander -in-Chief, Plymouth to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 1927, ADM 116/2478.

⁶² Commanding Officer Vice Admiral Bentinck to Secretary of the Admiralty, July 1926, ADM 116/2478.

1922. The Trust concerned itself with three primary tasks: one, to assist current or former sailors in need; two, to train former sailors for employment and equip them to ease back into civilian life; three, to assist the families of sailors in case of necessity or duress.⁶³ The Admiralty believed this Trust was in “a position to administer large funds for the benefit of Naval Charities of all types.”⁶⁴ Raising money for the Royal Naval Benevolent Trust made more sense after the passing of the Orphans' Pension Act, according to Admiral Brock, since the Trust could “view the circumstances of each case and grant monetary assistance to the widow, or contribute towards the support of her child in an Orphan Home, as may be most expedient.”⁶⁵ Thus, Navy Week emerged in 1927 as a result of the nexus between naval charities, the expansion of the welfare state, local traditions at Portsmouth, and growing distance from the dislocations of the Great War. As the interwar welfare state extended its sphere, civil society receded or reacted to fill in the gaps in welfare that always exist. While Navy Week would grow into one of the Royal Navy's greatest tools for marketing its services to the nation, its origins can be traced to the ripple effects of social legislation like the Widows', Orphans', and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act.

Portsmouth's “Naval Charities Week” in 1927 exceeded all expectations. In his report to the Admiralty, Admiral Osmond Brock, Commander-in-Chief at Portsmouth, stated: “The love of the British people for the Navy is well known, but I was astonished at the interest shewn in the ships and the frequent remarks that they had never had an opportunity of going

⁶³ “Chatham Navy Week Official Guide and Souvenir, 1938,” 355. 16 (422.3) B9848, National Maritime Museum (Greenwich). Henceforth, the National Maritime Museum will be NMM.

⁶⁴ Minutes of Secretary of the Admiralty, ADM 116/2478.

⁶⁵ Commander-in Chief, Portsmouth to the Secretary of the Admiralty, September 1927, ADM 116/2478.

on board a man-of-war in their lives.”⁶⁶ Brock became an ardent evangelist, and enthusiasm for Navy Week rapidly spread throughout the Navy. The Admiralty quickly decided to approve the holding of Navy Week in 1928 at the three Home Ports: Portsmouth, Chatham (Nore), and Plymouth.⁶⁷ Suddenly, concerns about the undignified nature of pageants and qualms about interfering with the normal course of training vanished. Over 50,000 attended Navy Week at Portsmouth in 1927 and attendance figures rose rapidly over the next few years, reaching 137,568 in 1930. The same could be said for attendance at Plymouth and Chatham. In 1928, 67,212 and 41,692 attended Navy Weeks at Plymouth and Chatham respectively. The following year, these figures reached 87,393 and 55,413 respectively, and they continued to grow.⁶⁸ Navy Week demonstrated that the Royal Navy was a commodity with high, almost insatiable demand.

The Commanders in the Home Ports and the Admiralty became rather intoxicated with this newfound popularity and eager to exploit an opportunity to shape minds; minds that were surprisingly devoid of much knowledge about naval affairs. Indeed, the origin of Navy Week was soon forgotten or at least pushed into the background. In 1930, the Navy Weeks Committee formally set down the two purposes of Navy Week. The first was to “interest and instruct the general public in the work and life of the Navy” and the second was “to assist Naval and Marine Charities.” The Committee considered the first “as being of considerably greater importance” than the second.⁶⁹ By 1931, the Secretary of the Admiralty, so impressed

⁶⁶ Report by Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth on Portsmouth Navy Week, 1927, ADM 116/2478.

⁶⁷ Memorandum by Second Sea Lord, October 5, 1927 and Report on Meeting of C-in-Cs of the Three Home Ports to Secretary of the Admiralty, ADM 116/2478.

⁶⁸ Admiralty Minutes, ADM 116/2478.

⁶⁹ Report of Navy Weeks Committee Meeting, 1930, ADM 116/2478.

by the popularity of Navy Week, requested that the Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet look into holding Navy Weeks in Scotland and Belfast, since they were far from the southern Home Ports and in need of seeing their Navy up close. Inquiries were made about possible locations in Scotland for Navy Weeks and how the Navy would be received. One report suggested that while “visits of ships to seaside resorts were always popular in the summer, [. . .] it is a matter of conjecture how the Scottish mind would react to the new idea of paying money to visit the ships.”⁷⁰ Stereotypes about Scottish frugality, however, were ultimately not responsible for halting the expansion of Navy Week. Rather, the Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet “regretfully” argued that an expansion of Navy Week was “impracticable” as it would interfere with training too much.⁷¹

The eagerness with which Officers and Ministers alike embraced Navy Week can be explained by a combination of their confidence in the Royal Navy's national importance with their surprise at how little the British people actually knew of it. The Commander-in-Chief at Portsmouth, Admiral Roger Keyes, proposed a radio address to be delivered on air via the BBC. The BBC had only been created in 1926, but it would play an important role in enabling anyone with a radio to hear the proceedings at interwar military displays. By the late 1930s, this meant just about every home in the country.⁷² Keyes' advertisement for 1930's Navy Week provides insight on how the Royal Navy perceived itself in relation to the British people and to British national consciousness. In an excerpt from the proposed address, Keyes wrote:

⁷⁰ Commanding Officer, Coast of Scotland, 1931, ADM 116/2478.

⁷¹ C-in-C, Atlantic Fleet Letter to Secretary of the Admiralty, March 31, 1931, ADM 116/2478.

⁷² Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 182.

That the people of this country have an intense and abiding interest in the Royal Navy is undoubted. [. . .] as Mr. Ramsay MacDonald so eloquently said a few months ago - “The way of Great Britain is on the Sea.... The stock of its people came from the sea; its flag is a flag of the sea. Our navy is no mere superfluity to us. It is us.” [. . .] And yet I have often been struck by the fact that the average man or woman knows practically nothing of the Navy. [. . .] Doubtless this ignorance can be explained by the fact that hitherto comparatively few people have ever had a chance to see anything of the Navy.⁷³

If this does not outline an outright contradiction, it at the very least expresses an interesting paradox. If the Royal Navy is the essence of Britishness, how can the British people so utterly lack self-awareness? This paradox can perhaps be explained by what Michael Billig has called the phenomenon of “banal nationalism,” or the ways in which “national identity in established nations is remembered because it is embedded in routines of life, which constantly remind, or 'flag', nationhood.”⁷⁴ Billig pays particularly close attention to the flag, discussing the different roles played by the “waved and unwaved” varieties. While “uncounted millions of flags” are often “mindless flags” or background color ignored by the public, this does not mean these “unwaved flags” do not sustain a national identity in a banal way as much as the “outbreaks of “hot” nationalism” that elicit the collective and passionate waving of flags.⁷⁵ Many in the Royal Navy in the 1920s would have understood and embraced such an explanation. Navy-mindedness lay dormant, not extinct. It was time to let the flag fly.

The decline in the Navy's bargaining position for government funding during the interwar period contributed to the service's excitement in embracing the propaganda

⁷³ Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth Memo to Admiralty, 1930, ADM 116/2478.

⁷⁴ Michael Billig, “Banal Nationalism,” in *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader*, edited by Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 185.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 185-191.

opportunity of Navy Week. The Admiralty hoped that Navy Weeks could be made into “annual events, equal in public interest to the Aldershot Tattoo or the RAF Display at Hendon.” In doing so, they could “go far to educate public opinion on the value of the Navy to the Empire and thus assist to reduce parliamentary and newspaper pressure for the reduction of Naval strength below that which the Admiralty considers essential.”⁷⁶ For all the talk of pageants being “undignified” in the early debates about the merits of holding a Navy Week, the Aldershot Tattoo and the RAF Air Display were consistently held up as models worthy of begrudging admiration.⁷⁷ Even in 1937, Navy Week still seemed preoccupied with disproving what navalists considered to be exaggerated public fears of the air menace.⁷⁸ Perhaps demonstrating greater confidence in air power's strategic rationale, supporters of the RAF Display at Hendon rarely referred to naval power at all.

The Royal Navy quickly adopted a professional and organized approach to maximize the public relations value of Navy Week. Starting with the President of Naval Charities Week's report on the first Navy Week in 1927, each Home Port showed an ever-growing attention to detail about how to make Navy Week a more entertaining and appealing event. Detailed records were kept, ranging from the number of programmes or ash trays sold to the number of parked cars.⁷⁹ On top of keeping track of the total number of attendees, particular attention was paid to the relative popularity of each “attraction” at Navy Week. The annual Navy Week report provided by each Home Port proffered advice about how best to improve the entertainment value of Navy Week based upon statistical findings and anecdotal reports

⁷⁶ Report by Chairman of Plymouth Navy Week Committee on 1928 Navy Week, ADM 116/2478.

⁷⁷ Admiralty Minutes, 1927, ADM 116/2478.

⁷⁸ *The Navy*, (August 1937), 227.

⁷⁹ Naval Charities Week Committee Report to Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, 1927, ADM 116/2478

compiled via “Visitor's Books.” In 1928, the Chairman of the Plymouth Navy Week Committee opined that “guided by experience in 1928, and with new ideas brought to bear on advertising, it is estimated that at least one hundred thousand visitors could be attracted to a Navy Week at Portsmouth in 1929.”⁸⁰ He was not far off. In 1930, the Portsmouth Navy Week Committee suggested that “to maintain the interest of the Public it will be necessary to provide fresh attractions, requiring further organisation.”⁸¹ By 1928, Chatham began to employ an advertising agency to help with publicity and the other Home Ports followed suit.⁸² Portsmouth Navy Week, the largest of the three, quickly became such a massive event that an officer “specially selected for duty as organizing Secretary of Navy Week” had to be appointed in 1930.⁸³ The advertising budgets shot through the roof, with the budget at Chatham, for example, going from less than £300 in 1929 to nearly £500 in 1930.⁸⁴

Over time, the Navy Week organizers began to think more about their audience and pay attention to the demographics of attendees. The Portsmouth Navy Committee reported that efforts to advertise Navy Week in “the industrial centres in the Midlands and London” seemed to be of questionable value. The report indicated that 33% of the visitors hailed from London, 23% from the Midlands, 3% from the Empire and foreign countries, and the rest from the local population.⁸⁵ Unlike the Army or the RAF, which could bring their shows to the public and to any part of the British Isles, the Royal Navy had to bring the people to

⁸⁰ Plymouth Navy Week Committee, 1928, ADM 116/2478

⁸¹ Portsmouth Navy Week Committee to Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, ADM 116/2478

⁸² Royal Naval Barracks, Chatham to Commander-in-Chief, Nore, 1929, ADM 116/2478

⁸³ Portsmouth Navy Week Committee to Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, 1930, ADM 116/2478

⁸⁴ Navy Weeks Committee, 1930, ADM 116/2478

⁸⁵ Portsmouth Navy Week Committee Report, 1938, ADM 179/63. To illustrate the growing advertising budget, £500 was spent on this focused attempt at advertisement alone in 1938.

them. The 1928 report by the Plymouth Navy Week Committee suggested that the success of Navy Week should be measured “by the public interest aroused in the Navy through articles and pictures in the press and by the opportunity given to the public to see men-of-war of all types in all stages of construction, and the weapons used in sea warfare.”⁸⁶ While Navy Week did bring thousands of Britons outside of the south to see the fleet, it remained an affair primarily attended by the surrounding communities at each Home Port. On top of trying to bring in people from different parts of the country, the Royal Navy also clearly sought to target particular social groups. The Commanding Officer of the aircraft carrier HMS *Courageous* lamented that “among English visitors it was observed that Navy Week does not appear to attract boys or young men to whom the recruiting side of Navy Week is meant to appeal.” Most regrettable of all, perhaps, “of the Preparatory and Public School type there were practically none” in attendance.⁸⁷ The Royal Navy wanted Navy Week to become a prestigious part of “The Season,” often lumping in Navy Week with upscale events like the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament and the Henley Regatta.⁸⁸ While it is unclear how successful the Royal Navy was at increasing the attendance of the particular sections of the British populace they targeted, they undeniably succeeded in growing Navy Week overall.⁸⁹

Very early on, producers of Navy Week prioritized entertainment value over didactic

⁸⁶ Plymouth Navy Week Committee, 1928, ADM 116/2478.

⁸⁷ Report by Commanding Officer Boucher of *HMS Courageous*, August 1936, ADM 179/63.

⁸⁸ Portsmouth Navy Week Committee, 1938, ADM 179/63.

⁸⁹ Despite the meticulous record-keeping of the Home Ports in regards to Navy Week, no data was recorded concerning the socio-economic background of attendees. In comparison to the Aldershot Tattoo, for example, which saw 1/5 of those in attendance arrive via automobile in 1929, the 1928 Chatham Navy Week saw less than 1/10 arrive in the same fashion. Considering Aldershot was far more out of the way than Plymouth, what this data tells us is hard to discern.

propaganda. In 1930, the Navy Weeks Committee summed up the priorities of Navy Week:

It has been their [the Home Ports'] aim also to increase the interest and instructive value of Navy Week by providing additional displays and exhibits of a purely Naval character. At the same time bearing in mind that a satisfied visitor is the best advertising agent, considerable effort was directed to improving the arrangements as regards control and guidance of the large crowds through the Dockyard and the provision of all practicable conveniences.⁹⁰

The Royal Navy was willing to sacrifice exhibits of “a purely Naval character” if it meant producing a “satisfied” customer. The seduction of commercialization proved incredibly difficult to resist. Just a few years from deeming pageantry and appeals to the public undignified, many in the Royal Navy were beginning to sound more like Harry Gordon Selfridge than Lord Nelson. A letter to the editor in *The Times* wondered, “what after all is a Naval Week but a Maritime Circus? Now we hear everlastingly of Nelson. I wonder what he would have thought.”⁹¹ Like the Army in its staging of Tattoos, then, the Royal Navy's efforts at propaganda were limited by the tools they had at their disposal and the interests of the general public. Rather than shaping how the public understood their Navy, they reacted to what the public wanted. While the first Navy Week at Portsmouth appeared a rather stolid affair without much fanfare or spectacle to speak of, Navy Week quickly moved in the direction of the spectacular along the lines of the Aldershot Tattoo and RAF Display. In 1930, Portsmouth employed Captain H. Oakes-Jones to produce a display entitled, “Relieving the Guard, 1805-1930.” Oakes-Jones was an Army Captain and the great producer of Tattoos at Aldershot and elsewhere during the interwar period. The Portsmouth Navy Week Committee reported that Oakes-Jones's production was so successful that “a similar item of pageantry,

⁹⁰ Navy Weeks Committee, 1930, ADM 116/2478.

⁹¹ *The Times*, August 7, 1931.

possibly representing another period, should be produced next year.” The Committee also recommended the incorporation of a “Q” boat encounter and a simulated attack on a “a pirate ship.”⁹² Critics still argued that Navy Week did not do enough to concentrate on the propaganda side of the event. In 1934, Lieutenant G.M. Bennett argued in the *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* that the Admiralty needed to abandon the pretense that Navy Week was primarily about charity, which caused an excessive concern with profit. Instead, the Admiralty needed to realize the full significance of propaganda and fully utilize the three methods solely in their hands – navy weeks, pageants, and fleet movements – to “overcome the inertia acquired by ages of apathy.”⁹³ For figures like Bennett, the main consideration needed to be the *effects* of naval propaganda in creating a desired shift in public opinion rather than mere profit and popularity.

In 1938, the Portsmouth Navy Week Committee reported that 102,103 boarded the *HMS Courageous* (an aircraft carrier), 85,761 boarded three different submarines, and 77,917 boarded the *HMS Nelson*. The Committee concluded and advised:

Ship visiting is the outstanding attraction of Navy Week to the Public [. . .]. The more that can be done on board ships to afford the public real insight into the working and living conditions in H.M. ships the greater is the enjoyment provided, thus better achieving the object of obtaining the sympathy and understanding of the Public towards the Navy.⁹⁴

While ship visiting did remain the bread and butter of Navy Week, producers expressed doubts about how much of a draw this could remain for visitors. By 1938, Plymouth's Navy

⁹² Portsmouth Navy Week Committee, 1930, ADM 116/2478. “Q” boats were decoy boats used to combat German u-boats during the First and Second World War.

⁹³ G.M. Bennett, “The Navy and the Nation,” *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 79 (February 1934), 45-46.

⁹⁴ Portsmouth Navy Week Committee, 1938, ADM 179/63.

Week Committee noted that “Navy Week had become a definite objective for those on holiday in the West Country” and that “the Public as a whole are firstly, no longer unaware of Navy Week and secondly, appreciate the value of the slogan 'Britain's Best Bobsworth.’” The Committee also demanded more support from the Admiralty to make sure the shows would remain popular. By 1938, the Committee noted, “the difficulties of introducing new items for the benefit of Press publicity and for those who have visited Navy Week before” was becoming more apparent each year. The Committee recommended the “participation of as many aircraft as possible” in future Navy Weeks, since they were of “the greatest possible value in creating “thrills” for the visitors.”⁹⁵ Portsmouth's Navy Week Committee's report in 1938 was a bit more sanguine about the future prospects of Navy Week, but nevertheless suggested that future success depended upon “the advent of the ships of the new construction programme, and increasing holidays with pay, together with the ever increasing transport facilities.”⁹⁶ That Navy Week Committees at Portsmouth and Plymouth sought greater support and recognition from the Admiralty is not surprising, but it does indicate something about the dynamism behind Navy Week. The Home Ports, especially Plymouth and Chatham, were not enthusiastic about the prospects of holding Navy Week at first, but their objections were eventually overwhelmed by the Admiralty's enthusiasm after the first Navy Week at Portsmouth. After Navy Week started, however, their development and evolution was as much, if not more, a product of the natural metastasizing tendency of a bureaucracy as it was the product of a centralized propaganda effort by the Admiralty.

⁹⁵ Plymouth Navy Week Committee, 1938, ADM 179/63.

⁹⁶ Portsmouth Navy Week Committee, 1938, ADM 179/63.

The equation outlined by the Portsmouth Navy Week Committee in 1938, in which “enjoyment” would lead to the greater “sympathy and understanding of the Public towards the Navy,” was always less than Euclidean in its logic. To enjoy something does not mean to understand something. Perhaps even more importantly, simply enjoying a spectacle does not indicate that one has consumed the intended meaning and come to the intended conclusions. In other words, to understand the impact of propaganda, one has to not only look at how many people were exposed to it, but what the message was and how it was perceived. Christopher Bell notes that Navy Week served as “Propaganda [that offered] the service a means to shape popular perceptions about seapower and enhance its popularity with the general public.”⁹⁷ Bell argues that Navy Week represented the most “overtly propagandistic of the navy's activities” during the interwar period and analyzes the content of this propaganda as well.⁹⁸ He does not, however, pay as much attention to the political and cultural milieu into which this propaganda was inserted. How can one explain the rising popularity of Navy Week – a phenomenon that Bell himself admits – while also suggesting that Navy Week failed to make the British public more naval-minded due to the Navy's reluctance to engage in propaganda? Even if it were accepted that the Royal Navy as a whole evinced reluctance, which certainly cannot be asserted for the Home Ports in particular, this did not get in the way of the creation of a hugely popular spectacle. It was the muddled message about the past and future role of naval power that broke apart the equation outlined by the Portsmouth Navy Week Committee. Navy Week undoubtedly popularized the Royal

⁹⁷ Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, 163.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

Navy once more, but exactly what did it popularize?

The Royal Navy's desire to open itself up to the public and create a popular show ran up against practical concerns about espionage. Their fears were not entirely baseless, even if they were tinged with racial stereotypes about the natural “inquisitiveness and impertinence” of the Japanese.⁹⁹ In 1935, the Admiralty gave permission for two Japanese officers to visit and inquire into the organization of Navy Week at Portsmouth.¹⁰⁰ The Admiralty soon feared the Japanese were interested in more than just learning how to put on a good show. In 1937, the Commander-in-Chief at Plymouth wrote to the Admiralty about catching a Japanese sailor looking at arresting gear on the HMS *Eagle* during Navy Week.¹⁰¹ This started a dialogue between the Admiralty and the Home Ports that demonstrates the same tension between the conflicting desires for publicity and “dignity” that characterized the debates about the first Navy Week. A confidential memorandum circulated by the Admiralty hoped that it would “be borne in mind that the vast majority of Navy Week visitors are innocent members of the British public, and that it would be unfortunate if they were met with an attitude savouring of suspicion.”¹⁰² While Admiral Fisher at Portsmouth believed a posture of “indifference” better suited the Navy's dignity and that not much could be gleaned by cursory glances anyway, the eventual policy arrived at was to question “every Chinaman, Japanese or obvious foreigner coming on board one of H.M. Ships.”¹⁰³ That this did nothing to address espionage by Soviet or Italian or German sailors meant little. Policies often reflect the

⁹⁹ Admiralty to Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth, 1937, ADM 179/63.

¹⁰⁰ *The Times*, March 7, 1935.

¹⁰¹ Arresting gear help to decelerate an aircraft after it lands on an aircraft carrier.

¹⁰² Admiralty to Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, 1937, ADM 179/63.

¹⁰³ Admiralty to Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth; ADM 179/63, Secret Memo from Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth, July 1937, ADM 179/63.

possible as much as they reflect an actual solution to the nominal problem being addressed.

Japanese sailors were not the only ones impressed by the HMS *Eagle*. As demonstrated by the statistics Navy Week Committees kept on ship visits, aircraft carriers tended to be the most popular ships at Navy Week alongside submarines. Aircraft carriers were the newest additions to the fleet, with the HMS *Argus* being the first ship capable of launching and recovering aircraft under operational conditions in 1918.¹⁰⁴ The first Navy Weeks allowed the public to see these novelties up close, perhaps for the first time. To many, especially those of a navalist bent, the aircraft carrier seemed “ungainly” or like an “immense factory.”¹⁰⁵ Compared to the sleek lines of a modern cruiser or battleship, the aircraft carrier looked distinctly unseaworthy. The public nevertheless found them fascinating because they represented a connection to air power. *The Naval Review* suggested that interest in the aircraft carrier HMS *Courageous* was solely due to its air component.¹⁰⁶

This is not the type of interest, however, that the Royal Navy would have cared to stoke, at least according to the prevailing naval doctrine of the interwar period. While the aircraft carrier eventually became the centerpiece of any modern blue-water naval fleet, this “Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)” was not rapid or smooth.¹⁰⁷ The Royal Navy has

¹⁰⁴ Geoffrey Till, “Maritime Airpower in the Interwar Period: The Information Dimension,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 27, No. 2 (June 2004), 303.

¹⁰⁵ *The Times*, August 16, 1927.

¹⁰⁶ *The Naval Review* 4 (1935), 727.

¹⁰⁷ Williamson Murray, “Thinking About Revolutions in Military Affairs,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 16 (August 1997), 69-76. The concept of the Revolution in Military Affairs has become incredibly popular in defense policy circles in the past two decades. Williamson Murray warns against an approach that focuses too much on the immediate impact of technology and points out how identifying a RMA in the past is far different from understanding it as a contemporary. While the airplane did ultimately revolutionize naval warfare, this does not mean that many air-power enthusiasts at the time were not nevertheless incorrect about the rapidity and extent of this revolution.

often been accused of being slow to embrace the revolutionary impact of air power, but its commitment to the battleship during the interwar period ultimately points to an undeniable weakness in naval aviation at the time. The Royal Navy wisely understood that aircraft could only effectively operate during daylight in good weather. The battleship, at the very least, was still needed to protect the aircraft carrier when its aircraft were forced to stay grounded.¹⁰⁸ Instead of one replacing the other, the aircraft carrier and the battleship evolved together. Even by 1944, British First Sea Lord Cunningham was still insisting to Churchill that the battleship “remained the basis of the strength of the fleet. . . [and] . . . a heavier broadside than the enemy is still a very telling weapon in a naval action.”¹⁰⁹ In many ways, those skeptical about the ability of aircraft to sink heavily armored and armed capital ships were vindicated by the Second World War. While the aircraft carrier clearly determined many naval battles in the Pacific Theater, Till notes that the battleship often determined the outcome of naval battles in the European Theater and “proved as difficult to sink when underway as their interwar advocates had suggested.”¹¹⁰ Of course, no one could have known before the outbreak of hostilities just how much new technologies had changed the nature of naval warfare. In terms of spending priorities, however, perception *determined* reality, and the Royal Navy had to wonder if the popularity of the aircraft carrier at Navy Week was

¹⁰⁸ Duncan Redford, “Review Article: From Pre- to Post-Dreadnought: Recent Research on the Royal Navy, 1880-1945,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 45 (November 2010), 873. For an example of the critical school, which argues that the Royal Navy's concentration on the battleship at the expense of naval aviation posed “dire implications for the survival of Britain itself,” see Angus Britts, *Neglected Skies: The Demise of British Naval Power, 1922-42* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017), 10.

¹⁰⁹ Geoffrey Till argues that “existing weapons systems (most obviously the battleship) proved able to subsume many aspects of this new way of war and survived in militarily useful form much longer than the most extreme airpower enthusiasts then anticipated and since accepted.” Till, “Maritime Airpower,” 298-300.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 303.

doing more to make the British people and their government more grateful for their fleet of ships or fleet of bombers. Prevailing doctrine in the Royal Navy during the interwar period held that the aircraft carrier would serve a useful purpose in naval warfare, but that the battleship alone possessed the firepower to maintain “command of the seas.”¹¹¹ The wisdom or folly of this doctrine is up for debate, especially whether it was more or less reasonable considering the information available at the time. What is more relevant to my subject is whether the propaganda at Navy Week helped to further the Royal Navy's agenda. Despite their efforts to enlighten the public about the Navy's importance, ignorance about the “less spectacular workings of sea power” was feared to be widespread.¹¹² The popularity of the aircraft carrier at Navy Week risked undermining the public's belief in the importance of a surface fleet and emboldening further the claims of the most radical air power enthusiasts.

Navy Week invited the public to climb into a submarine, walk the deck of a carrier, inspect the gun turrets on a battleship, and get a taste of the day-to-day life of a sailor. As the statistics on ship visits show, submarines were incredibly popular. Only aircraft carriers seemed to draw more visitors.¹¹³ *The Times* noted that “to judge from the comments of the people waiting, submarines still seem to most people a trifle uncanny – far more uncanny, for instance, than aeroplanes.”¹¹⁴ In contrast, the interior arrangements of the surface fleet seemed to bore visitors.¹¹⁵ Submarines even surpassed the “Mighty *Hood*,” the largest and most modern battleship in the world, in terms of popularity at the first Navy Week at

¹¹¹ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 282.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Portsmouth Navy Week Committee Report, 1938, ADM 179/63.

¹¹⁴ *The Times*, August 13, 1929.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Plymouth in 1928.¹¹⁶ The HMS *Hood* embarked on a worldwide publicity tour in the early 1920s that brought out tens of thousands to observe the ship at anchor. The 1928 Plymouth Navy Week Programme noted that the *Hood* was greeted everywhere “with enthusiasm and unbounded hospitality.”¹¹⁷ While Mark Connelly has claimed that “battleships were always the most popular attraction” at Navy Week, when given the choice to see the “Mighty *Hood*” or submarines up close, crowds more often chose the latter.¹¹⁸ Submarines represented a real challenge to the producers of Navy Week. The feeling that submarines were “uncanny” or insidiously modern resonated with the British public.¹¹⁹ A journalist at *The Times* visited a submarine at Portsmouth Navy Week in 1935 and commented on the “confusing mash of machinery and gadgets” that he witnessed. The visit reminded him of the “grimness of submarine warfare,” which made him recall the feeling of first experiencing combat in France.¹²⁰ Descriptions of submarines in Navy Week programmes, however, were technical and to-the-point in comparison to those of battleships, cruisers, or even destroyers. The Royal Navy found itself in the interesting position of deriding the fighting abilities of one of their own weapons of war. Imagine a king, having just built a huge number of catapults and trebuchets, putting on shows for his barons that showed them being useless against fortified walls again and again. This is the equivalent of what the Royal Navy did with submarines at

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, August 9, 1928.

¹¹⁷ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, July 2, 1928; Report on Plymouth Navy Week, 1928, ADM 116/2478; “Plymouth Navy Week Programme, 1928,” 355. 16 (423.5) “1928” ROY B9834, NMM.

¹¹⁸ Mark Connelly, “Battleships and British Society, 1920-1960,” *International Journal of Naval History* 3, no. 2/3 (August-December 2004).

¹¹⁹ For a source that discusses the “un-English” nature of the submarine and its cultural evolution, see Duncan Redford, *The Submarine: A Cultural History from the Great War to Nuclear Combat* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

¹²⁰ *The Times*, August 7, 1935.

Navy Week. Year after year, producers staged displays of submarines being defeated in simulated battles. This was due to the experience of the First World War and the secondary importance of a submarine fleet for the Royal Navy, whose first priorities were to “command the seas” and protect oceanic trading routes. The Royal Navy wanted the public to come away from Navy Week believing that submarines did not represent an unstoppable, existential threat to the country, while also reminding the public how close the U-boat had come to bringing the country to ruin. This was not mere bluff to reassure the public either. According to John Buckley, “the complacent assumption of the Royal Navy that the U-boat threat had been annulled remained unquestioned throughout the interwar period.” The nearly catastrophic losses inflicted by German U-boats in the winter of 1940-1941 revealed just how dangerously wrong this assumption proved to be.¹²¹

The “Navy myth” and “liberal militarism.”

Unlike the RAF's Hendon Display, Navy Week could call upon the rich history, tradition, pageantry, and ceremony of Britain's “Senior Service.” By the time of the first Navy Week in 1927, the Admiralty and many Royal Navy officers clearly felt it was time to fight back against the rising tide, to rebuild the “wooden walls” of Britain, and once more stoke the “Navy myth.” The “Navy myth,” a term used by Geoffrey Till, is not to be confused with something false or fabricated about the Royal Navy.¹²² Malcom Smith, borrowing from Claude Lévi-Strauss, suggests that a myth can mean “a widely held view of the past which has helped to shape and explain the present.” Lévi-Strauss argues that such a myth will only

¹²¹ John Buckley, “Contradictions in British Defence Policy, 1937-1939,” *Twentieth Century British History* 5, no. 1 (November 1994), 102.

¹²² Geoffrey Till, “Richmond and the Faith Reaffirmed,” in *Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in Memory of Bryan McLaren Ranft*, edited by Geoffrey Till (London: Routledge, 2006), 6.

“work for a given moment in time.” This is because myth, drawing upon the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, is the product of a process of dominant groups in a society adapting and negotiating “successions of hegemonic compromises.”¹²³ Key components of the “Navy myth,” as outlined by Till, include the Navy's close connection to cherished “British” ideas of free trade, liberalism, and the restraint of arbitrary power.¹²⁴ Liberalism, however, was on the decline in interwar Britain. The growth of mass culture and politics as well as the injection of psychology into western culture under the influence of Freud and others at the turn of the century shook the ideological foundation of the liberal bourgeoisie.¹²⁵ Liberals tended to believe in mankind's basic rationality or what is often called “epistemological optimism.” Liberal thinkers ranging from John Locke to Karl Popper have all assumed that human beings are “of substantially equal, and rather high, rationality” and that they “tend to apply the rules of rational decision-making in the pursuit of their “self-interest.””¹²⁶ The First World War and the chaos that it ushered in in its wake helped to instantiate many prewar critiques of established assumptions concerning human nature and civilization.¹²⁷

While hardly among the *avant garde*, some British military theorists and thinkers were nevertheless swept along by these same cultural and intellectual currents. Air power enthusiasts (or pessimists, depending on one's perspective) ranging from Hugh Trenchard to J.F.C. Fuller to Oswald Moseley to L.E.O. Charlton all shared a fascination with the

¹²³ Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

¹²⁴ Till, “Richmond and the Faith Reaffirmed,” 6.

¹²⁵ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 4.

¹²⁶ Felix E. Oppenheim, Review of Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (*World Politics* 16, No. 2 (January 1964), 353.

¹²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010); Hynes, *A War Imagined*; Richard Overy, *The Twilight Years: The Paradox of Britain between the Wars* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 1; Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 31.

“psychology” of the masses at war. In contrast, navalists like Captain Bernard Acworth and Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond tended to see warfare in a more traditional manner. Richmond never quite broke away from the century in which he was raised and never bought into the idea that London or major industrial areas should be viewed primarily as “nerve centers.” For Richmond, the importance of a city like London was not psychological, but real and quantifiable in economic and military terms.¹²⁸ Captain Bernard Acworth, an eccentric Liberal MP and “right-wing navalist,” believed that “sea-power” was the solution to the “modernist world” and all its problems.¹²⁹ Acworth lamented the decline of individualism, the growth of committees, “mass action,” and bureaucracy. For Acworth, the Royal Navy was “chivalrous” and would never create a strategic rationale dependent upon the bombing of innocents.¹³⁰

Basil Liddell Hart and J.F.C. Fuller are the towering figures of military theory in Britain in the twentieth century. Often grouped together, they were very different figures.¹³¹ Liddell Hart viewed Fuller as a mentor in many ways, calling him “the greatest intellectual power I have ever come across, a titan among minnows.”¹³² Still, the pair eventually had a

¹²⁸ Robin Higham, *The Military Intellectuals in Britain, 1918-1939* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966), 51, 193.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 63. Acworth's classification as a “right-wing navalist” at the time illustrates as much as anything how British political culture was moving away from classical liberalism. While eccentric (Acworth wrote about birds, creationism, and the adoption of a coal-powered fleet) and often critical of “modernity,” Acworth still ran as a Liberal and held very traditionally liberal views about the role of the state and the importance of the individual.

¹³⁰ Bernard Acworth, *The Navy and the Next War: A Vindication of Sea Power* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1934), 34, 114, 282.

¹³¹ David Omissi makes the mistake of grouping Liddell Hart and Fuller as fascist sympathizers in *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 197. Omissi's conflation overlooks Liddell Hart's evolution as a thinker over the course of his career as he matured and emerged out of Fuller's shadow.

¹³² Azar Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War: Fuller, Liddell Hart, Douhet, and other Modernists* (Oxford:

falling out as Fuller became increasingly committed to Oswald Moseley and the British Union of Fascists during the 1930s. By 1937, the relationship was shattered. Liddell Hart possessed an abiding hatred of fascism and their friendship was not repaired until after the Second World War. Fuller, however, had been a “proto-fascist” all his intellectual life. He embraced social Darwinism and anti-liberalism, rejected democracy, and embraced the cult of the great man.¹³³ As Brian Holden Reid has put it, “Fuller identified himself with a major intellectual current [. . .] that owed little to the democratic, empirical English tradition.”¹³⁴ While both Liddell Hart and Fuller became tied together by their advocacy for mechanization, they came to their general conclusions about military strategy from very different places. In an article published in the *Air Review* in 1935, Fuller argued that “entire populations will have to be disciplined to resist air attacks, and become nations in discipline in place of nations in arms.” Fuller then expands upon this idea by comparing democracies to dictatorships:

Democracy is based on the principle of unrestricted freedom, but a nation in discipline will depend for its security not upon freedom but upon obedience and obedience demands an autocracy to enforce it. Consequently, those nations which have established Communist or Fascist governments will be in a far more effective position to protect themselves through discipline than those which have not.¹³⁵

Fuller's call for discipline comes along with, or perhaps derives from, his belief that war had fundamentally changed. He believed that psychological (or moral) factors had become more decisive than physical factors (destruction) in determining outcomes. He believed predictions about the *physical* destructiveness of aerial bombardment to be overwrought, but warned that

Clarendon Press, 1998), 143.

¹³³ Ibid, 15, 35-37.

¹³⁴ Brian Holden Reid quoted in Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 15.

¹³⁵ J.F.C. Fuller quoted in *Air Review*, November 1935.

the *psychological* danger they posed to a delicate, modern, and individualist society was not sufficiently appreciated. Fuller argued that the principles of democracy were out of step with military requirements and that Britain's "tradition-bound" leaders had not yet realized that "moral terror is a more potent means of winning a war than physical horror."¹³⁶ While Fuller is best known for his pioneering theories about mechanized warfare, he believed the quickest means of imposing "moral terror" was through the use of bombers; as a result, he expected the air strike to be decisive in the next war and can be counted amongst the ranks of air power enthusiasts.¹³⁷ Unsurprisingly, just two years later, Fuller published *Towards Armageddon*, which promoted the idea of "dictatorial warfare" to be pursued by a "warfare state" capable of waging a "war of nerves."¹³⁸

Towards Armageddon represents a complete inversion of David Edgerton's notion of Britain's long-standing practice of "liberal militarism." The word "liberal" here is doing a lot of work as an adjective modifying "militarism." A better term for what Edgerton seeks to analyze might be "the liberal way of warfare." The four key components outlined by Edgerton are as follows: One, opposition to mass conscript armies; two, reliance on technology instead of manpower; three, the targeting not only of enemy armed forces, but also "at their civil populations and economic capacity;" and four, a self-understanding of a "universalist ideology" and a particular "conception of a world order."¹³⁹ Edgerton argues for

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Higham, *The Military Intellectuals in Britain*, 114.

¹³⁸ Brian Holden Reid, 2009 "Fuller, John Frederick Charles (1878–1966), army officer." (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. 21 Dec. 2018.) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-33290>.

¹³⁹ David Edgerton, "Liberal Militarism and the British State," *New Left Review* 185 (January 1991), 141.

four separate historical phases of “liberal militarism,” each one characterized by a dominant technology: navalism, air forceism, nuclearism, and an American “Pax Technologica.”¹⁴⁰ During the “air forceism” phase, the RAF became the technologically focused means to avoid a conscript army and strike directly at an opposing nation. What Edgerton overlooks, however, is how much this new phase's focus on directly attacking an enemy's “civil population” led to certain implications concerning domestic politics. In fact, “air forceism” was, in some ways, the end of “liberal militarism” altogether.

Fuller's program outlines the regimentation and militarization of civilian life in order to fight wars more effectively. This is, quite simply, militarism. Perhaps most importantly, Fuller clearly arrived at this conclusion as he became more and more concerned with the threat from the air. “Air forceism” is serving to undermine the liberalism of “liberal militarism.” Basil Liddell Hart, however, remained throughout his life a thoroughgoing “Edwardian rationalist.” The “indirect approach,” perhaps his most famous contribution to military theory, called for the use of movement to get astride an enemy's “line of communications and retreat” in order to make them “paralyzed or unhinged.” Above all else, as a veteran of the First World War, Liddell Hart firmly believed (or was it hoped?) that wars could be fought without the tremendous loss of life that characterized trench warfare on the Western Front. Liddell Hart pulled from Sir Herbert Richmond, Julian Corbett, and others in analyzing and promoting a “British Way in Warfare.”¹⁴¹ In a lecture to the Royal United Services Institution in London in 1931, Liddell Hart argued that the British had traditionally

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Alex Danchev, “Liddell Hart's Big Idea,” *Review of International Studies* 25, No. 1 (January 1999), 43.

relied upon a naval force that applied financial and military pressure on the enemy.¹⁴² The First World War represented a departure, and a disastrous one at that, from traditional British strategy. While Fuller's understanding of history was characterized by a sort of technological determinism, Liddell Hart tended to believe in the importance of great men, ideas, and accidents. He reached back into the 18th century, beyond the ages of revolution and industry, for strategic insight into how to fight limited wars that avoided massive bloodshed and societal transformation.

Liddell Hart undoubtedly borrowed many ideas and insights from Julian Corbett, the most distinguished naval theorist of the early twentieth century and another “Edwardian liberal.” Corbett built his career upon assailing the Nelsonian/Napoleonic emphasis on battle over other strategic concerns. Corbett wrote, “As with land warfare, the destruction of the enemy's main fleet is often spoken of as the objective, whereas in reality this act is but a means towards it – by the destruction of the enemy's shield the way is opened for a more effective blockade or for the landing of the army.”¹⁴³ Corbett's assessment of naval power would be vindicated by the First World War more so than the Nelsonian/Mahanian vision of naval power, but it remained a minority point of view in a Nelson-obsessed Royal Navy.¹⁴⁴ Bernard Acworth, another liberal military strategist, also lamented the slaughter in the trenches, but he believed that “in spite of many errors of judgment it remains true that it was the Navy that saved England and the world in those terrible years, and it was the Navy that

¹⁴² Ibid, 39.

¹⁴³ Julian Corbett quoted in Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 159.

¹⁴⁴ Daniel A. Baugh, ““An Achievement of Unusual Interest and Stature,” *Naval War College Review* 44, No. 2 (Spring 1991), 129; Geoffrey Till, *Air Power and the Royal Navy*, 167.

alone made the noble self-sacrifice and devotion of the million dead and permanently disabled who won the military victory ashore.” The First World War had been a noble victory and the Royal Navy proved itself to be the “perfect mirror of the country.”¹⁴⁵ Liddell Hart, Corbett, Richmond, and Acworth all looked to tradition and to history in order to devise the proper strategy for Britain's defense. They came to the task with a distinctly liberal predisposition; liberalism often proved to be a shield *against* air power enthusiasm.

Liddell Hart's promotion of the “British Way in Warfare” is closely connected to his support of “limited liability” on the European continent. During the interwar period, the strategy of “limited liability” held that the British should limit the size of their army on the continent and instead rely upon their own naval and air forces to pursue victory. This would prevent the slaughter of the First World War and return the British to their traditional strategy of avoiding the need for a large army.¹⁴⁶ The British government *de facto* adopted Liddell Hart's strategy of “limited liability” during the 1930s.¹⁴⁷ The collapse of France in 1940, the “miracle” at Dunkirk notwithstanding, tarnished Liddell Hart's reputation for many years during and after the Second World War.¹⁴⁸ During the war, George Orwell offered his own scathing critique of Liddell Hart's strategy, suggesting that it was “not likely to be successful unless you are willing to betray your allies whenever it pays you to do so.” For Orwell,

¹⁴⁵ Acworth, *The Navy and the Next War*, 284-285.

¹⁴⁶ Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 207-210.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 285, 208-209. Liddell Hart played a very important role during the tenures of Duff Cooper (1935-1937) and especially Leslie Hore-Belisha (1937-1940) as Secretaries of State for War. He served as an adviser to both, but played a particularly important role early on under Hore-Belisha. In fact, Liddell Hart's prominent role stimulated criticism, as many did not think “journalists” should be dictating military policy. As a result, Hore-Belisha severed the relationship by 1938.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 252.

Liddell Hart had been so “disgusted by the spectacle of Passchendaele, [. . . he] seems to have ended by believing that wars can be won on the defensive or without fighting.”¹⁴⁹

Liddell Hart did believe in the “primacy of the defensive,” which in turn made him more skeptical than most of his contemporaries when it came to an assessment of the aerial threat. Early in his writing career, Liddell Hart scaremongered with the best of them:

Imagine for a moment London, Manchester, Birmingham and half a dozen other great cities simultaneously attacked, the business localities and Fleet Street wrecked, Whitehall a heap of ruins, the slum districts maddened into the impulse to break loose and maraud, the railways cut, factories destroyed. Would not the general will to resist vanish, and what use would be the still determined factions of the nation, without organization and central direction.¹⁵⁰

This passage appeared in his first major work, *Paris, or the Future of War*, which was published in 1925. By the early 1930s, however, Liddell Hart's views on the decisiveness of air power had already begun to shift as his own strategic views matured. Air attacks might still be gruesome, but “the British Way in Warfare” had not been made obsolete by new military technology. Liddell Hart's doubts persisted into the Second World War even though by this time the collapse in his reputation made him less willing to voice his opinions in public.¹⁵¹ As Alex Danchev has argued, Liddell Hart harbored “grave practical and ethical doubts about almost every aspect of Allied strategy, most conspicuously the area bombing campaign.”¹⁵² “The British Way in Warfare” was “businesslike” for Liddell Hart who believed that the “only true military object is the moral one of subduing the enemy's will to resist, with the least possible economic, human, and ethical loss to ourselves.”¹⁵³ Unlike

¹⁴⁹ George Orwell quoted in Danchev, “Liddell Hart's Big Idea,” 40.

¹⁵⁰ Liddell Hart quoted in Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 128.

¹⁵¹ Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 252-253.

¹⁵² Danchev, “Liddell Hart's Big Idea,” 39.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 35.

Fuller, Liddell Hart sought to create a military strategy that allowed for the *preservation* of a preexisting way of life. As Liddell Hart moved away from his early dalliance with air enthusiasm, his politics also moved increasingly towards classical liberalism. In his private papers, Liddell Hart wrote:

Government at the best is a necessary evil. [. . .] The virtue of Parliamentary government does not lie in its government, but in its available checks on governmental abuses. [. . .] Full freedom may be unattainable, but the minimum condition necessary for the development of the mind is that you should be free to be true in speech to what you think.¹⁵⁴

He left no doubt what side he was on in the debate between individualism and collectivism.

“Totalitarianism must not be fought by totalitarian means,” Liddell Hart argued, and “individual rights were superior to state rights, and the end could never justify the means.”¹⁵⁵

Bernard Acworth likewise advocated reliance upon naval power as a means of limiting the impact war and war-planning could have on civil society. “Sea-power, as strong, chivalrous, and yet relentless in war as it is gentle, hospitable, and friendly in peace,” wrote Acworth,

“remains the key to England's security.”¹⁵⁶ Acworth and Liddell Hart shared not only a revulsion against the slaughter in the trenches, but also for the very concept of “total war.”

Liddell Hart made Carl von Clausewitz his intellectual *bête noire* (some might say straw man), famously labeling him “the mahdi of mass and mutual massacre.”¹⁵⁷ He believed

Clausewitz's “principle of force without limit and without calculation of cost” was only “fit for a hate-maddened mob” and that it represented “the negation of statesmanship and of

¹⁵⁴ Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 233.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 234-235.

¹⁵⁶ Acworth, *The Navy and the Next War*, 283.

¹⁵⁷ Danchev, “Liddell Hart's Big Idea,” 39.

intelligent strategy.”¹⁵⁸ The two world wars, according to Liddell Hart, represented the manifestation of Clausewitzian principles in their slaughter and lack of moderation. Whether or not the Second World War could have been won using the limited, restrained methods of Liddell Hart and Acworth is debatable, but it does point to the fault line separating traditionalists skeptical of the impact of terror bombing and still faithful to naval power from air-minded enthusiasts and paranoiacs. Those who believed in the inevitable movement towards “total war,” wars in which the side that most fully and efficiently throws its entire weight behind a war effort wins, tended to fall into the second group. Figures like Acworth and Liddell Hart seemed to stand against the tendencies of their age and suggested another way – a way not through the mud or in the sky nor through conscription and mass mobilization. What they advocated was what they considered the British Way or what one might call the liberal militarism of the navalist phase proposed by Edgerton.

Fuller and others on the so-called left and right of the political spectrum, and very often by different routes, came to view the offensive threat of air power as a compelling reason (or excuse) to abandon traditional social and political arrangements in pursuit of a new political and social order better able to endure and persevere in the wars of the future. Fuller, for example, believed that the push for free markets caused wars and that the British should pursue economic self-sufficiency.¹⁵⁹ The “Navy myth,” on the other hand, was bound up of course in the language of empire, but also of trade, markets, and liberty. The Royal

¹⁵⁸ Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd Revised ed. (New York: Meridian, 1967), 339-343. Liddell Hart did admit, however, that “Clausewitz's disciples carried his teaching to an extreme which their master had not intended.” Still, he believed Clausewitz bore a great deal of the blame nevertheless due to his style, which “invited misinterpretation,”

¹⁵⁹ Higham, *The Military Intellectuals in Britain*, 68, 78-79.

Navy kept war, and its baleful impacts, away from the British Isles. Wars could be won with a few Jack Tars manning the ships created with superior British technology financed by a free economy's abundant surplus. All the while traditional British liberties could be maintained, profitable global trade networks preserved, and the militarization of society avoided.

Navy Week often employed the “businesslike” language of the “British Way in Warfare,” but the political context had been transformed by the First World War and the decline of liberalism. Time and time again, Navy Week Official Programmes explained the importance of the Royal Navy in preserving trade and the “freedom” of the British people.

The 1934 Chatham Navy Week Official Souvenir and Guide explained to readers:

There may never be another war. Our houses may never catch fire and we may never have accidents in our motor-cars; but, none the less, we take out Insurance Policies against such disasters. The Navy is your Insurance Policy against Starvation. The “Freedom of the Seas” is a fine ideal: to an Island Race it is an essential factor of existence.¹⁶⁰

However rational an argument comparing a product to insurance might be, it is fair to say that insurance has never been the most titillating subject to most people. The 1935 Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve London Navy Week Official Guide and Souvenir pointed out how the map on display illustrated “how YOU really do depend for your prosperity in peace, and for your very existence in war, on the protection by the Navy of our world-wide food carrying trade-routes.”¹⁶¹ The use of the word “really” gives the game away and shows the extent to which the Royal Navy found itself on the defensive in providing a justification for its continued importance to British security.

¹⁶⁰ “Chatham Navy Week Official Souvenir and Guide, 1934,” 355.16 (422.3) B9832, NMM, 35.

¹⁶¹ “RNVR London Division: London Navy Week Official Guide and Souvenir, 1935,” 355. 16 (421) “1935” ROY B9778, NMM, 33. Capitalization is found in the original.

Concern about the importance of trade to British prosperity in general took a hit with the onset of the world depression of the 1930s. Free trade, an idea firmly at the heart of British politics for so long, appeared to die a relatively quiet death in 1932 with the signing of the Import Duties Act. Elections had been decided upon this issue and coalitions broken apart as recently as 1923. As Stanley Baldwin remarked in 1930, “The age of free trade is passing . . . because no new free-traders are being born today.”¹⁶² Frank Trentmann noted the growth of intervention and, especially, cheap money produced “a new policy world [...] that spoiled any simple grand causal connection between trade policy and the state of the nation.”¹⁶³ While it was still true that Britain relied on trade to feed itself, the word “trade,” and all of the imagery attached to it, no longer perked up the ears or lit up the eyes of the common Briton as much as it used to. Conservatives, Liberals, and Labourites alike began abandoning the cause of free trade for different reasons and only a few holdouts remained during the 1930s. The cry of “dear food” no longer resonated loudly enough to prevent the death of free trade and the adoption of Imperial Preference.¹⁶⁴ The Royal Navy, of course, also made much out of its role in helping to create and protect the British Empire. This was a key aspect of the “Navy myth” and the language connecting the Navy with trade did not necessarily imply “free trade.” Nevertheless, it seems less than mere coincidence that the relative decline in the Royal Navy's funding in the 1930s coincided with a decline in the public's concern with the importance of trade in general, and free trade in particular. As

¹⁶² Robert Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government of 1929-1931* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 228-229.

¹⁶³ Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 347.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

Duncan Redford has noted, free trade made Great Britain into less of an island and therefore more dependent upon naval power.¹⁶⁵ For the Royal Navy, the push for national – or at the very least imperial – autonomy represented a frontal assault on its strategic rationale.

The Great War at Navy Week.

Unlike the relatively unproven Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy could not present itself realistically as a deterrent to war. The Royal Navy had been strong before the First World War, yet war still came and it was a long and costly one at that. The producers of Navy Week struggled to inform the public about the important role the Royal Navy played in defeating the Central Powers during the First World War. The introduction to a catalog of paintings displayed at Portsmouth Navy Week in 1936 summed up the public's view of the Navy since the end of the Great War:

The conclusion of the Great War of 1914-1918 saw the Royal Navy at the zenith of its power, and its prestige higher than ever. The World realized that British Sea Power was the dominant factor in the collapse of our enemies – but the war over, the British Public quickly forgot. For political and economic reasons, hundreds of our ships were paid off and scrapped. [. . .] History had repeated itself and public interest in naval affairs virtually ceased – a situation aggravated on this occasion by the popular fallacy that the future safety of the Empire depended more upon the strength in the air than in power at sea. Recent events abroad, however, are causing the peoples of these Islands and their Empire to turn again with anxious eyes to their Navy [. . .].¹⁶⁶

Navy Weeks during the 1930s tried to put on shows and displays that demonstrated the important role the Navy played in Germany's demise, but the Navy's successes during the Great War were hardly ideal subjects for the spectacular. The two naval encounters most commonly depicted at Navy Week were the Battle of Jutland and the raid on Zeebrugge.

¹⁶⁵ Redford, “The Royal Navy, Sea Blindness, and British National Identity,” 68.

¹⁶⁶ The Navy in Peace and War: Catalogue of an Exhibition at Portsmouth Navy Week, 1936, 940. 45 NAV P7661, NMM.

Producers of Navy Week demonstrated these encounters with miniature model ships and these demonstrations did become some of the most popular displays at Navy Week. The *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* reported that the Zeebrugge display at the 1929 Plymouth Navy Week showed how “[. . .] a small band of knights sailed right into the dragon's lair, and, although they did not kill the dragon, they cut off one of his many heads.”¹⁶⁷ This same display featured throughout the 1930s and at each of the three locations. The Chatham Navy Weeks Committee's Report in 1938 recommended keeping the Zeebrugge display since it remained very popular and showed no signs of being “time expired.”¹⁶⁸ Zeebrugge made for an interesting subject, but it could hardly be passed off as an important victory that proved the importance of the Royal Navy in winning the last war. The April 1918 raid, in which the British attempted to sink ships in the canal entrance to block the German fleet's access to the port of Bruges-Zeebrugge, failed in its objective to put the port out of commission and cost the British 227 lives versus only 8 for the Germans. To the credit of producers at Navy Week, the raid was never elevated into a great victory. The 1934 “Chatham Navy Week Official Souvenir and Guide” admitted that while the raid on Zeebrugge was “one of the most audacious attacks ever carried out by the British Navy,” it was nevertheless “not successful in completely preventing the passage of submarines from Zeebrugge (the Germans were able to dredge a passage around the obstructions, and used the port again after about a fortnight or three weeks), the moral effect was enormous.”¹⁶⁹ How much of a moral effect the raid had on the war is up for debate, but the modesty of British propaganda here is remarkable.

¹⁶⁷ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, June 20, 1929.

¹⁶⁸ “1935-1939, Report, Chatham Navy Weeks Committee, 1938,” ADM 179/63.

¹⁶⁹ “Chatham Navy Week Official Souvenir and Guide,” 1934, 355.16 (422.3) B9832, NMM.

Brian Bond and Williamson Murray have suggested that “the whole sorry story of the interwar period suggests that British military institutions, like British society in general, made every effort to escape the realities of the last war and to forget the hard lessons of that conflict.” The Royal Navy, in particular, displayed a tendency to prefer focusing on Jutland rather than the broader strategic successes of the war.¹⁷⁰ The spring 1916 Battle of Jutland was the closest the First World War ever came to the Mahanian dream of a titanic and decisive clash of fleets.¹⁷¹ It was titanic, but it was hardly decisive. The 1936 “Plymouth Navy Week Official Guide and Souvenir” described Jutland as “the greatest sea battle that the world has ever known, over 260 ships taking part.”¹⁷² The producers created a demonstration of the battle that used “slides and models,” but of course the epic nature of such an event had to be lost in translation. The grandeur of such a naval battle would be impossible to reproduce. The size of the ships, the range at which they fired at one another, the expanse of open, churning sea – all these features are spectacular, even sublime, but impossible to condense and present in a small theater. By contrast, the speed, the sound, and the movement of an air raid as demonstrated at places like Hendon and elsewhere worked far better as entertaining simulacra. If spectators left the Jutland demonstration entertained, and by all accounts they were, it is less than clear that they left impressed by the power and importance of the Navy's ships. The “Plymouth Navy Week Official Guide and Souvenir” summed up

¹⁷⁰ Brian Bond and Williamson Murray, “The British Armed Forces, 1918-1939,” in *Military Effectiveness: Volume 2, The Interwar Period*, New Edition, edited by Allan Millet and Williamson Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 117.

¹⁷¹ Ronald H. Spector, *At War at Sea: Sailors and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 67.

¹⁷² “Plymouth Navy Week, 1936: Official Guide and Souvenir,” 355. 16 (423,5) “1936” ROY B9785, NMM.

the results of the Battle of Jutland rather glibly: “The result of the battle, despite our heavy losses, had the effect of strengthening still further our command of the seas, and hastened the demoralisation of the German Navy, which mutinied rather than put to sea to meet the Grand Fleet again.”¹⁷³ Jutland did nothing to shake the overwhelming material superiority of the Royal Navy and thus played an important role in making German sailors less than convinced that a future engagement would be anything less than futile. This decline in morale led to the work stoppages and mutinies in the German High Seas Fleet in 1917 and in the final stages of the war in November 1918. What the “Plymouth Navy Week Official Guide and Souvenir” leaves out of its account of Jutland is any discussion of the importance of the blockade and the decline in the quality of life for the average German sailor as the war dragged on into 1917 and 1918.¹⁷⁴

At the end of the Great War, a British midshipman wrote, “all of us resented it that Waterloo should precede Trafalgar and that Trafalgar should never have happened at all.”¹⁷⁵ The Royal Navy played an undeniably important role in the Great War, but it did not play the role that it actually wanted. Paul Kennedy summed up the effect the First World War had on the public image of the fleet:

The world conflict of 1914-1918 proved in the main to be no cheap and swift maritime-based campaign, but a hard and bloody war of attrition by mass armies in which sea power appeared to be a subsidiary factor. [. . .] The Senior Service could lose the war, but it could not win it: that had to be done by the army, which garnered all the credit thereby. In the second place this war against the U-boats was a continuous series of small-scale actions which were hardly capable of exciting a public which had expected glorious fleet battles and did not understand that these

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Spector, *At War at Sea*, 118-119.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 120.

were not necessary to achieve that basic negative aim. In this respect, it would be no exaggeration to state that the course of the First World War substantially discredited that mighty host of great grey battleships, swinging on their anchors in the distant harbour of Scapa.¹⁷⁶

Navy Week, and naval propaganda in general, thus faced an uphill battle. The Royal Navy had to present the Great War in a way that fascinated the British public, but it also had to make a convincing argument about the importance of the Royal Navy in winning the war. These two aims were, in fact, contradictory. Outside of the fashion industry, starvation does not usually sell, yet this is ultimately how the Royal Navy contributed most to the Allied cause. The 1935 “London Navy Week Official Guide and Souvenir” reminded readers that the “Navy saved this country from starvation by the U-boats and the whole Allied cause from defeat.”¹⁷⁷ Indeed, Britain imported well over half of its food and possessed the lowest number of agricultural workers of any major power, which made them incredibly vulnerable to a disruption in international trade.¹⁷⁸ This remained true in the interwar period. In 1929, Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald spoke of the importance of the Navy:

In our case, our navy is the very life of our nation. We are a small island. For good or for ill, the lines of our Empire have been thrown all over the face of the earth. We have to import our food. A month's blockade, effectively carried out, would starve us all in the event of any conflict. Britain's navy is Britain itself and the sea is our security and our safety.¹⁷⁹

The Royal Navy protected these vital trade routes and maintained Britain's status as a global entrepôt, but it could not win the war alone. Naval power represented a remedy against defeat

¹⁷⁶ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 259.

¹⁷⁷ “RNVR London Division: London Navy Week Official Guide and Souvenir, 1935,” 355. 16 (421), NMM.

¹⁷⁸ While the Royal Navy succeeded in maintaining Britain's access to world trade during the First World War, the precarious campaign against the u-boat threat helped nudge Britain down the path of import substitution and the abandonment of free trade. By the 1970s, Great Britain “ceased to be a major food importer and turned to growing its own.” Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 10-12, 284.

¹⁷⁹ Till, “The Strategic Interface,” 182.

rather than a recipe for a quick, decisive war or, even better, a deterrent to prevent wars in the first place.

By 1918, after four long years of bloody war in the trenches, the effects of the naval blockade on Germany had indeed made themselves felt. Average caloric intake declined to a dangerous level. The meat ration, for example, fell to 135 grams per person per week, less than 1/7th of the peacetime average of 1 kilogram per person per week. The blockade caused the physical deterioration of the German people and crippled morale.¹⁸⁰ Some have even suggested the blockade caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Germans.¹⁸¹ Still, the blockade's contributions came at a significant cost and would have been impossible without the tremendous sacrifices of Allied armies on the western and eastern fronts. Navalists at the time, including Herbert Richmond, recognized that while an effective blockade would be devastating to an import-dependent island nation like Britain, it was a less decisive strategy against nations less dependent on overseas trade.¹⁸² I argue that the widespread embrace of the potential of air power by the public and strategists alike speaks to a rebuke of “liberal militarism,” but this transition nevertheless illustrates a different kind of continuity. Both navalists and air enthusiasts displayed a tendency to project the specific vulnerabilities of Britain, whether real or perceived, onto their enemies.

¹⁸⁰ Eric Osborne, *Britain's Economic Blockade, 1914-1919* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 182-183.

¹⁸¹ Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 52. It is difficult to create a clear line of causation linking the blockade to deaths from malnutrition or starvation. Other scholars have noted the importance of the other side of the coin; in particular, German agricultural policy. With their options limited by the scarcity imposed by war and blockade, the German government nevertheless chose to prioritize the recruitment of soldiers away from farms rather than focus on providing enough food for soldiers and civilians. See Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 254. For a fascinating analysis of how this scarcity affected women in Berlin and helped shift the German public's expectations about the responsibilities of the state, see Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

¹⁸² Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 254.

With the emergence of a rather untested instrument of military power in the shape of the airplane, a British public becoming more and more disillusioned with the outcome of the Great War might be excused for being grateful for their Navy's traditions but hopeful that air power could prevent war altogether. Starvation, after all, takes a while. In 1931, *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette* promoted Navy Week by suggesting the British people depended on the Royal Navy for “their security, freedom, and the assurance of their daily bread,” but one's “daily bread” is a less urgent need than the need to not be bombed to death.¹⁸³ After witnessing the air display at Hendon, Captain Frederick Aarons, for example, thought he heard “the funeral hymn of this island's isolation.” The next war would not be a war of starvation, according to Aarons, but of sudden devastation brought about by air power.¹⁸⁴

The Greenwich Night Pageant, 1933.

The Greenwich Night Pageant of 1933 represents the apogee of interwar naval pageantry outside of the massive fleet reviews. It arrived at a moment in which the popularity of Navy Week seemed to be lagging. Attendance at Portsmouth Navy Week in 1932 and 1933 dropped. These figures would rise again in the coming years, but the temporary decline was apparent enough to warrant concern about a decline of “sea-mindedness.”¹⁸⁵ Admiral Roger Keyes, who had been Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth (1929-1931), remarked on the night

¹⁸³ *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette*, July 8, 1931. Of course, this should not diminish the horrors of starvation caused by warfare. Many wars have led to more deaths via starvation than battlefield casualties, but starvation does take time.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, July 4, 1936.

¹⁸⁵ *Portsmouth Evening News*, July 29, 1937. A subsequent report concluded that the dip in attendance in 1932 was more than likely a product of the decision to allow servicemen free admission and the overall decline in the economy. “Report on Portsmouth Navy Week,” DAN/512, NMM.

of the rehearsal of the Greenwich Night Pageant that “the Navy has gone through a pretty bad time of late” and he hoped the pageant would “be the inaugury of the renaissance of the British Navy.”¹⁸⁶ Keyes more than likely had the Disarmament Conference in Geneva in mind in talking about the Navy's recent woes. In terms of public enthusiasm and governmental backing, the Royal Navy appeared to be stalled.

The Greenwich Night Pageant became a phenomenal success and a generally admired example of what a pageant could do when done well. While the Greenwich Night Pageant was only witnessed in person by perhaps 80,000-90,000 people, glowing press reports and the stature and influence of those in attendance magnified its significance. The Queen, the Prince of Wales, and the entire Cabinet attended the first showing. The Pageant, with its accompanying Whitebait Ministerial Dinner and free river cruises down the Thames for journalists, received a great deal of “free” publicity. Francis McMurtrie, the Chairman of the Publicity Sub-Committee for the Greenwich Night Pageant, estimated that the pageant received around £15,083 worth of advertising from publications, which included national newspapers, magazines, technical journals, and the foreign press.¹⁸⁷ For Bernard Acworth and others, the pageant indicated that the British people still cared for their Navy “of which they now see so little and of which so little, in fact, remains.”¹⁸⁸ A critic in *Country Life* noted that

¹⁸⁶ *The Kentish Mercury*, June 16, 1933. An article clipping found in DOM/89/6. Domville Newspaper Clippings, NMM.

¹⁸⁷ “Reports on Results of Publicity,” Bryant C22, Correspondence Greenwich Night Pageant, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London (from here on LHC). Vice-Admiral Barry Domville even reached out to Harry Gordon Selfridge in order to enlist his help in publicizing the pageant. Selfridge responded that he might be able “to make a Callisthenes article” in support of the pageant. Callisthenes, of course, was the *nom de plum* of Selfridge and his Callisthenes articles were published in numerous daily newspapers. See Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 158.

¹⁸⁸ *Morning Post*, June 14, 1933. Article clipping found in DOM/89/6, NMM.

before seeing the Greenwich Naval Pageant “and but for a vague theoretical distaste,” he had “known nothing of pageants.” He ended up enjoying it, however, noting that the figures in the Pageant “seemed to be a part of a twilight consciousness like history passing in a dream.”¹⁸⁹ *The Evening News* suggested that “if it had been held abroad, pious high-brows would have made pilgrimages to it and returned declaring that this effete and inartistic country could not even begin to present so magically beautiful a spectacle.”¹⁹⁰ Other sources called the Pageant an “outstanding success,” “a magnificent and stirring spectacle, worthy of international renown,” and an act “of poetry committed by the nation.”¹⁹¹ The clothing was said to be good enough “to be free from the musical comedy touch which has so often been fatal to historical pageantry.”¹⁹² The Greenwich Night Pageant seemed to rise above most other pageants in its seriousness and professionalism, establishing itself “as a national event of decided importance to the life and well-being of the British Navy.”¹⁹³

Sir Arthur Bryant and Vice-Admiral Barry Domville were the two men primarily responsible for producing the Greenwich Night Pageant. Bryant was one of the most enthusiastic torch-bearers (literally, pageant-masters loved torches) of the Parkerian pageant after the First World War and would go on to become one of the most well-known popular historians of the twentieth century.¹⁹⁴ Vice-Admiral Barry Domville served as the President of

¹⁸⁹ *Country Life*. Article clipping found in DOM/89/6, NMM.

¹⁹⁰ *The Evening News*, June 17, 1933. Article clipping found in DOM/89/6, NMM.

¹⁹¹ *The Daily Mirror*, June 27, 1933; *The Star*, June 17, 1933; *Truth*, June 4, 1933. Not all were impressed by the show. “Mrs. Rosenthal of Birmingham” expressed her displeasure with the show in the *Church Times*, citing the bad music and the lisping announcer as her primary criticisms. She reported that her faith in affairs managed by the Royal Navy was “shattered.” *Church Times*, June 30, 1933. Article clippings found in DOM/89/6, NMM.

¹⁹² *Lewisham Borough News*, June 13, 1933. Article clipping found in DOM/89/6, NMM.

¹⁹³ *The Fleet*, July 1933. Article clipping found in DOM/89/6, NMM.

¹⁹⁴ Julia Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth Century Britain* (Lanham, MD:

the Royal Naval College, Greenwich and as the President of the Greenwich Night Pageant.¹⁹⁵ While the Royal Navy did not directly fund the Pageant, it did give its tacit approval and became quite clearly invested in the Pageant's success. Domville wrote in a letter to Arthur Bryant that the First Lord of the Admiralty had approved of a naval pageant meant “to show the interest displayed by the various Sovereigns in Naval affairs.”¹⁹⁶ The Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence also sent a letter to Domville directing him to articles concerning public reception of the Pageant.¹⁹⁷ In laying out the purpose of their Pageant, Domville and Bryant suggested, “there is nothing like a Pageant to kindle enthusiasm and knit up a community in a common endeavour.” In addition, they wanted the audience to “go away feeling that you have seen a good show, impressed with the glory of our wonderful Heritage built upon the Sea, and determined to do your part in seeing that this Heritage shall not be allowed to fade through neglect.”¹⁹⁸ Bryant committed himself to using spectacle to revive a sense of patriotism in the 1920s and 1930s. In this regard, interwar military pageantry took part in the same cultural project as the “middlebrow” novelists of the interwar period. Identified by Rosa Maria Bracco and Alison Light, these writers, which include figures like Daphne du Maurier, Agatha Christie, and Jan Struther, sought to reconnect modern Britain to its past and

Lexington Books, 2005), 51-52.

¹⁹⁵ “Book of the Greenwich Night Pageant, 1933.” 394. 5 BRY P0482, NMM.

¹⁹⁶ Bryant C22, Correspondence Greenwich Night Pageant, LHC.

¹⁹⁷ Letter from Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence to Domville, DOM/89/5, NMM.

¹⁹⁸ “Greenwich Night Pageant.” 394.5 DOM P0841, NMM. Interestingly enough, however, Bryant had some rather harsh words for his cast, bemoaning the “incredible stupidity of amateurs” to Domville at one point. Bryant comes off as the stereotypical *prima donna* in his correspondence with Domville and others. Bryant lashed out at his wardrobe director with vitriol, threatened to quit numerous times, and consistently reminded Domville and others of the financial sacrifices he was making in pursuit of a successful pageant. See Bryant C22, Correspondence Greenwich Night Pageant, LHC.

redefine “Englishness” in the process.¹⁹⁹ Patriotism, in Bryant's view, had declined under the collective weight of modernity and “progressive” opinion.²⁰⁰ Bryant sought to “recreate the past on a large, popular scale,” the dramatic effect of which was heightened by “mass colour and sound, music and crowd movement.”²⁰¹ Bryant explained in the “Scenario” that the Pageant aimed to “present certain of the chief scenes in the past history of Greenwich and of its associations with the Navy.”²⁰² Bryant wanted to show how the Royal Navy “remained a legitimate, indeed crucial object of British national pride, notwithstanding the contemporary disdain for arms.” The Royal Navy, according to Bryant, made the British, “arbiters, or at any rate, joint-arbiters, of international morality and human progress.” The “great armoured ships” of the fleet enabled Britain to receive their “daily bread,” but also enabled them “to give law to the lawless and justice to the oppressed.”²⁰³

Both men staked their pride on the financial and artistic success of the Pageant. Putting off several book projects, Bryant jumped at the opportunity to produce. The free reign offered to Bryant by Domville and the grounds of the Royal Naval College proved too tantalizing a prospect for him to turn down. “Except for the Aldershot Tattoo or a big Cochran revue,” Bryant admitted, “no producer in this country is ever offered such a scope.”²⁰⁴ The Pageant required six months of preparation and consisted of a cast of about

¹⁹⁹ Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 15; Alison Light, *Forever England*, 1-11.

²⁰⁰ Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant*, 53.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 52.

²⁰² “Greenwich Night Pageant: Scenario of The Pageant by Arthur Bryant,” 394. 5 (421.6) ROY B6613, NMM.

²⁰³ Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant*, 53-54.

²⁰⁴ Letter from Bryant to Newington, March 29, 1933, Bryant C22, Correspondence Greenwich Night Pageant, LHC.

two and half thousand. *The Engineer* was impressed with the 12,000 person capacity temporary stands “said to be the largest temporary structure of its class ever erected.”²⁰⁵ Bryant positioned the stage facing the Thames in between Christopher Wren's famous William and Mary Buildings of the Old Royal Naval College. Instead of making use of the Thames, Bryant instead employed a vast white screen upon which was “thrown, by lights and silhouette reflector, pictures and shadows of river, sea and ships.”²⁰⁶

Bryant outlined his ambition for the Pageant: “It will be played at high speed and at night [. . .] so that the full effect of the coloured searchlights will not be felt until the drama has begun [. . .] the dramatic effect will be obtained by crowd movement [. . .] an announcer speaking out of the darkness – an accompaniment comparable to the choruses in a Greek tragedy or in Hardy's *Dynasts*.”²⁰⁷ Bryant's programme, “The Rise of a Nation,” showcased a history of Britain whose key features were frequent and timely interventions of naval power. Brilliantly lit model ships and actors staged events including the return of the *Golden Hind*, “Drake's Drum,” “The Flight of Mary of Modena,” and the “Funeral Procession” for Lord Nelson.²⁰⁸ The scenes selected by Bryant illustrated his own idiosyncratic and Old Tory view of British history.²⁰⁹ He portrayed the Stuart monarchs with great sympathy, while ignoring Oliver Cromwell's role in resurrecting British naval power and creating the first professional, permanent fleet.²¹⁰ Admiral Robert Blake appears nowhere

²⁰⁵ *The Engineer*. Article clipping found in DOM/80/2, NMM.

²⁰⁶ “Greenwich Night Pageant: Scenario of The Pageant by Arthur Bryant,” 394. 5 (421.6) ROY B6613, NMM.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁰⁸ “Book of the Greenwich Night Pageant, 1933,” 394. 5 BRY P0482, NMM.

²⁰⁹ Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant*, 56.

²¹⁰ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 58.

to be seen. In Act II, Scene I, which Bryant entitled “The Tragic King (1633-1649), “sinister shapes [are seen] bearing away plunder from the fallen royal palace – pictures, hangings, doorways and pieces of paneling.”²¹¹ Bryant sought to illustrate scenes in Britain's naval history specifically connected to Greenwich, which might explain certain omissions. Admiral Blake, however, was only buried in Westminster Abbey after lying in state at the Queen's House, Greenwich. In a letter to Bryant, Geoffrey Callender, a naval historian at the Royal Naval College, queries whether Bryant could “introduce some episode from the Civil War to suggest what was of far more importance to Greenwich than the Battle of the Heights of Abraham.” According to Callender, “some scene suggesting the adverse fortune of Charles I would point a contrast.”²¹² It does appear as if Bryant heeded some of Callender's advice or perhaps he had plans on expanding Act III anyway. Regardless, the exchange clearly shows Bryant's Toryism, which seemed at times to become almost akin to Jacobitism.

Bryant believed that true Britishness, while still residing in the humble, common Briton, came under assault by the forces of modernity. According to Julia Stapleton, Bryant believed a major split occurred in the 17th century, after which Britain struggled “to retain its inherited character, not just in an institutional but a moral sense too.” Charles II popularized the concept of the “gentleman” in England, according to Bryant, but this cherished cultural trait had been “eroded by laissez-faire in the nineteenth century.”²¹³ For Bryant, the nineteenth century was a century better forgotten than embraced, and the outline of his Pageant illustrates his historical biases. The first five acts of the Pageant span the birth of

²¹¹ “Book of the Greenwich Night Pageant, 1933,” 394. 5 BRY P0482, NMM.

²¹² Letter from Geoffrey Callender to Arthur Bryant, November 5, 1932, Bryant C22, Correspondence Greenwich Night Pageant, LHC.

²¹³ Stapleton, *Sir Arthur Bryant*, 56.

Queen Elizabeth I in 1533 to the burial of Nelson in 1806. The epilogue, which Bryant entitled “The Freedom of the Seas,” covers the years from 1806-1933. This is an odd breakdown considering the long nineteenth century represents the high point of a *Pax Britannica* founded upon British naval supremacy. The First World War proved to be as problematic for the Tory view of history on display at Greenwich as it had been for the Whig view of history on display at the Wembley and Aldershot Tattoos.²¹⁴ By all accounts, the Greenwich Night Pageant ended up leaving the viewer transfixed by the romance of naval power. *Punch* suggested that it must have been hard for the layman to discern the purpose of the Pageant, but that it was nevertheless charming: “Aldershot for pomp and Hendon for thrills, but Greenwich for the enchantment of pageantry in a setting of old grey stone. This is a much more modest affair than the gigantic Army Tattoos we have become accustomed to, but it has the delicate colouring and the perfection of detail that one looks for in a first-class miniature.”²¹⁵ *Sketch*, a woman's magazine, agreed that the Pageant was charming compared to the frightening RAF Display at Hendon.²¹⁶ Far from simply seeking to charm the audience, Vice-Admiral Domville and Admiral Keyes hoped that the Pageant would promote “sea-mindedness” and prevent Britain's “wonderful Heritage built upon the Sea” from fading through neglect. In viewing the pageant, especially the epilogue, it is hard to discern why any viewer would come away feeling the need to support a stronger Royal Navy based upon anything other than dewy-eyed sentimentalism.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 55-59. Stapleton argues that the belief in the “progress of liberty” and of the “uninterrupted development” of Britain's political institutions tied together “consensual” Whig historians in the twentieth century. Bryant fundamentally disagreed with the idea of “uninterrupted development.”

²¹⁵ *Punch*. Article clipping found in DOM/80/1, NMM.

²¹⁶ *Sketch*. Article clipping found in DOM/80/1, NMM.

The epilogue of the Greenwich Night Pageant, which covered the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, proved to be the most confusing portion of the Pageant. The scene is fascinating, even haunting, but the message about the Royal Navy's role in the First World War and its role in Great Britain's future is muddled to say the least:

Then the noises die away, to be succeeded by a strange and haunting march, and a beam of light reveals a company of armed men marching across the top of the steps. Their helmets are of steel and their faces are pointed and phosphorescent, while their uniforms gleam with slime. Their motions are not those of humans, but of rigid automata. At first the light picks out only them; then another beam reveals their leader, who is Death, with skull head and white floating robe and riding a horse. [. . .] For one second there is darkness; then, in one blinding flash of light, the whole stage seems to shake with sound. [. . .] For some thirty seconds, all hell seems to have broken loose, as sirens add to the inferno of noise; then the flames grow quieter and the sound of battle with them, till a ray of light illumines a single figure standing erect at the top of the steps. He is in naval uniform and is blowing a bugle, and as he blows, the notes of his call strike high across the din and banish it. Then notes and figure are dimmed and the roadway below is flooded with light, and filled with a crowd in the clothes of August 1914. They pass across the stage, surrounding and following a company of Naval Reservists, led by the Town Band, marching to the station on Sunday, August 2. The cheerful strains of brass band and the cheering, confident crowd provide a complete contrast to the previous scene.²¹⁷

Perhaps the scene might have made more sense in person, but it left spectators at the time disappointed, or at least miffed, as well. The scene seemed to start off with the chaos of the First World War. A figure “in naval uniform” then banishes the chaos only for the scene to conclude with imagery from August 1914. What is one to make of it all? The scene, at the very least, focused heavily on the tragic inhumanity of modern war, as one might expect from Bryant. It was also, however, light on the details of how the Royal Navy contributed to victory in the Great War. Drake is shown bowling, Nelson giving orders, and the Grand Fleet

²¹⁷ “Book of the Greenwich Night Pageant, 1933,” 394. 5 BRY P0482, NMM.

is thrown up in silhouette on the screen, but the action of the Great War takes place in the trenches.²¹⁸

G.K.'s Weekly reported that the World War One scene was a finale “by no means worthy of the other scenes,” but that it could not “mar enjoyment of the pageant [. . .] for the ineffectuality with which the War is expressed can quickly be forgotten.”²¹⁹ Robert Byron of the *Week-end Review* thought the “whole Pageant deteriorated” after the introduction of the Great War scene. Byron was one of the Bright Young Things; the group of flamboyant young British men and women who delighted in their own decadence and were so famously depicted by Evelyn Waugh in *Vile Bodies*. Byron's critiques, however, had nothing to do with the pageant being some fuddy-duddy, low-brow manipulation of the past in order to stir up patriotic fervor. He found Bryant's depiction of the First World War to be offensive and wondered why the First World War proved so difficult to present in a heroic light. After viewing the final act, Byron wrote:

It might be, I thought, that under the conditions of modern warfare humanity is dignified no longer and history becomes sordid; that, in fact, the interpretation of the war, as here presented, was a true interpretation. And then, I thought, this could not be so. For man, to remain man under such conditions, must be more heroic than ever he was. The interpretation was a false one. Yet it was typical, I must admit, of what passes for patriotism in this age. [. . .] *Why was it, I asked myself, that recent history should evoke such falsity while the events of the further past monopolised the verities of our national attainment?*²²⁰

The juxtaposition between the anti-modernism of Bryant's politics and his highly modern methods resulted in a sort of foreshortening of history. The modern and the ancient, often

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ *G.K.'s Weekly*, June 22, 1933. Article clipping found in “Domville Newspaper Cuttings, Night Pageant,” DOM/89/5, NMM. *Week-end Review*, July 1, 1933.

²²⁰ *Week-end Review*, July 1, 1933. Article clipping found in DOM/89/5, NMM. Italics my own.

imagined, past were smashed together, while the more recent past was lost or neglected. This tendency is also present in Fascist and Nazi spectacle, iconography, and stagecraft.²²¹

Domville suggested to Bryant the inclusion of a reference to the rise of German naval power between Act IV (“Nelson Goes Home) and the Epilogue. This, he argued, would avoid such foreshortening by providing a sense of continuity. Bryant neglected Domville's advice. For Byron, “the continuity of English history and tradition, provoked [. . .] comparisons with countries where such continuity has of late been rudely interrupted.”²²² Byron had Russia in mind in regards to the latter, but unlike Bryant he clearly did not see the 19th century or the First World War necessarily as breaks separating Britain from its past. In a pageant devoted to naval power, the presentation of the First World War was still dominated by imagery from the trenches. For Bryant, this was as much a result of his wholesale rejection of modernity as it was a specific rundown of the First World War, yet the result was the same: the First World War was not presented as an affirmation of the Senior Service's role in successfully prosecuting the last war. As propaganda, the Greenwich Night Pageant might have succeeded in producing a generic sense of “sea-mindedness,” but it hardly succeeded in producing a clear message about the need for naval supremacy moving forward.

Byron also took issue with the patriotism on display in the Pageant, which he felt was unfortunately indicative of the patriotism of his day and age.

one of the disasters, perhaps the major disaster, of our age [. . .] is the transformation of patriotics from an emotion of innate and unconscious self-respect into one of exterior and artificially boosted vulgarity. *The pride of the English in former days was the expression of tangible assets, of freedom, comfort, humour and safety from*

²²¹ Simonetta Falasca Zamponi, “Of Storytellers and Master Narratives: Modernity, Memory, and History in Fascist Italy,” *Social Science History* 22, No. 4 (Winter 1998), 419.

²²² *Week-end Review*, July 1, 1933. Article clipping found in DOM/89/5, NMM.

invasion. To-day our publicists would have it that our pride must represent emotion and emotion only, must be distorted with false drama, be fed with sentimentalism and choked with allegorical symbols. *The war, thus interpreted, allows no triumph to the individual*. We weep over him in the abstract, in the mass, and in the same breath give thanks that it was we who won. What we won, for what we fought, no one inquires or bothers even to remember. The Greenwich pageant, in simple language, gave answer to the inquiry and bade the audience remember. But, when the war came, itself forgot the lesson it had taught.²²³

Perhaps Byron exaggerated the purity of British patriotism in the past, but the “transformation of patriotics” he outlined made the resurrection of the “Navy myth” a much more difficult task in the interwar period. The close relationship between naval power and the ideals of freedom and individualism reaches all the way back to Adam Smith and can be traced through the thought of Richard Cobden, Lord Palmerston, and J.S. Mill. Indeed, Richard Cobden, that arch-pacifist of the nineteenth century, was a “champion of the fleet” and saw it as “the ideal instrument of a free, commercial, and sea-going people.”²²⁴ Liberals had often associated the Navy with “progressive” causes like free trade and the end of the slave trade. Naval power posed far less of a threat to civil society than “more regressive forms of militarism.”²²⁵ The Navy, of course, had traditionally been indelibly intertwined

²²³ Ibid. Italics my own. Byron would become well-versed in military spectacle and mass propaganda. Byron famously attended the last Nuremberg rally in 1938 with Nancy Mitford and was a staunch critic of Nazism throughout the 1930s. In his lamentations over the emotionalism and lack of respect for the individual on display at Greenwich can be seen a foreshadowing of his subsequent anti-Nazi views. Bryant, on the other hand, would go on to be a Nazi sympathizer, suggesting that Hitler had enabled Germany to “find her soul.” His support of Hitler did not survive the war, however, and Bryant would emerge as a mainstream figure once more in the post-war era. Sykes, C. H. 2004 “Byron, Robert (1905–1941), traveller and writer on art.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 30 Dec. 2018. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128>. 001.0 001/odnb-9780198614128-e-32229; Griffiths, Richard. 2011 “Bryant, Sir Arthur Wynne Morgan (1899–1985), historian.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 30 Dec. 2018. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-30867>.

²²⁴ Bernard Semmel, *Liberalism and Naval Strategy: Ideology, Interest, and Sea Power during the Pax Britannica* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 79–80.

²²⁵ Matthew Johnson, “The Liberal Party and the Naval League in Great Britain Before the Great War,” *Twentieth Century British History* 22, No. 2 (June 2011), 137.

with notions of British national identity. Archibald Hurd, an important naval publicist of the interwar period and a member of the Executive Committee of the Navy League, claimed that “the British peoples [...] are incurably maritime – by geographical distribution, by instinct, and by political bias, because sea power has always suggested freedom.”²²⁶ While these connections may indeed be “mythical,” they nevertheless had been a crucial part of navalist discourse for generations. The “language” of patriotism concerning the First World War had moved beyond that of the “liberal militarism” that had sustained a navalist Britain for so long.

With the Epilogue of the Greenwich Night Pageant sometimes leaving spectators disappointed or confused, the climax of the night often ended up being the ceremonial and symbolic interring of Admiral Nelson.²²⁷ While it is not surprising that boosters for the Royal Navy would look to Nelson, the Royal Navy's greatest hero, the 1930s witnessed a concerted effort to resurrect “the spirit of Nelson.” At Portsmouth Navy Week, for example, church services, administered by the Bishop of Portsmouth, were held aboard Nelson's flagship, HMS *Victory*. With this solemn act, participants at Navy Week virtually canonized Nelson while christening the *Victory* as a holy space.²²⁸ In 1938, Portsmouth Navy Week began to amass “relics of Nelson” for public display, forming the embryo of what would eventually become the National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth.²²⁹ Like the military tattoos of the era, Navy Week called upon the rich history, traditions, and culture of the Royal Navy in

²²⁶ Archibald Hurd quoted in Till, “Introduction: British Naval Thinking: A Contradiction in Terms?,” 6.

²²⁷ *The Times*, June 17, 1933. “Greenwich Naval Pageant,” *The Naval Review* 21, no. 2 (May 1933), 197-198.

²²⁸ *The Times*, August 2, 1937; *The Navy*, September 1937.

²²⁹ *The Times*, July 4, 1938. Important Nelson material is also stored at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, including the uniform in which Nelson was killed.

order to entertain and educate the public. While Portsmouth had HMS *Victory*, Plymouth had a “half-scale sailing model” of Drake's *Golden Hind*, which apparently sailed in “close proximity to some of the latest warships.” Plymouth also featured the singing of “sea shanties by seamen dressed as they were in Nelson's time; and accompanied by the traditional fiddler.”²³⁰ Royal Marines, marching to the beat of traditional music in historical uniforms, were also a common sight at Navy Week; one more element marking the “customs and superstitions” of the event, as one commentator put it.²³¹ The Silver Jubilee and Coronation Fleet Reviews were also drenched with ceremony, tradition, and a respect for the past.²³² The past cast a large shadow indeed, with even the royal family forced to pay homage to Nelson and the *Victory* before the Coronation Review. *The Times* reported that the family was shown where Nelson fell and died, while Princess Elizabeth was given “a book containing the history of the *Victory* and the story of Trafalgar.”²³³ Thus, while the Royal Navy and the spectators hugging the shores demonstrated their obedience to King and nation, the royal family had to demonstrate their own obedience to posterity, however self-serving the act of attaching themselves to Nelson might have been.

Most press reports responded positively to the emphasis placed on history and pageantry at the Navy's displays; however, there were also concerns that the Navy was not spectacular enough to grab the attention of the average Briton. By the end of the 1930s,

²³⁰ *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette*, June 19, 1937.

²³¹ *The Times*, August 30, 1937.

²³² For more information on the development of Fleet Review ceremonies and rituals in the 19th century see, Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*. The development of these ceremonies is connected to “the invention of tradition,” which is examined in Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual,” 101-165.

²³³ *The Times*, May 21, 1937.

commentators noted that Navy Week had evolved into the “national pageant,” a “peculiarly British institution” fitting for an “island nation.”²³⁴ At the same time, others expressed throughout the interwar period concerns that the British people lived in “an age grown tired of pomp” and that the Royal Navy did “not lend itself to popular spectacular pageantry and entertainment” like the RAF Air Display.²³⁵ The Greenwich Night Pageant, however, proved to be a huge success, drawing large crowds each night despite having a great deal of competition in London. Attendance figures at Navy Week continued to rise throughout the 1930s and plans for Navy Weeks in Australia, South Africa, and Scotland emerged in 1938.²³⁶ The demand for naval spectacle proved to be quite elastic; the limiting factor seemed to be the venues rather than the demand. What matters more, however, is how the viewing public interpreted their experience at naval displays and what this led the public to believe about their Navy.

“They were all wonderful boats:” The Air Power Problem and Public Perception.

On May 20, 1937, 163 British, Empire, and foreign ships packed themselves into Spithead for the Coronation Naval Review of the newly crowned George VI. *The Times'* Special Correspondent solemnly described the assembled fleet as “a picture of massive immobility [,] [. . .] an array of floating power presenting itself, mute and still, for its Sovereign's approval.”²³⁷ The holy stillness of the occasion was only punctuated by the sound of the minute-long gun salute at the beginning of the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert's*

²³⁴ Ibid, August 2, 1937 and July 30, 1938.

²³⁵ Ibid, July 20, 1935 and June 27, 1933.

²³⁶ Ibid, January 17, 1938 and April 12, 1938.

²³⁷ Ibid, May 21, 1937.

voyage through the lines and the cheers arising from each ship as it was passed by his Royal Majesty.²³⁸ The message was clear: the fleet, representing both itself and the nation, stood in disciplined readiness to serve its king, who, with his mere presence, turned an inert mass into an imposing, unified force. However, while the opening act of the review featured the roving king acting upon his fleet, or, in more Foucauldian terms, “disciplining docile bodies,” the end of the king's voyage through the fleet saw the tables turned.²³⁹ With *Victoria and Albert's* anchor dropped and the fleet similarly immobile, “out of the mists in the east came the squadrons in big formations [, . . .] filling the peace of the Review with the swift roar of their engines:” the Fleet Air Arm had arrived. The Naval Correspondent at *The Times*, perhaps unsurprisingly, described the intruding aircraft as “black and vulture-like,” insisting that their arrival rudely disturbed a fleet that had finally begun to look “glistening and in holiday mood” in the afternoon sun. The Fleet Air Arm indifferently “thundered” overhead, unable by its very nature to abide by the same rules of decorum exhibited by the ships at the Review.²⁴⁰ The king could not glide by the aircraft in his yacht and initiate a response; instead, the king, stationary and with his neck craned to the sky like everyone else, simply watched as aircraft roared toward him and ultimately back into the mists from which they came.

²³⁸ The 1937 Coronation Fleet Review is also famous for the BBC broadcast of the illumination of the fleet later that night. Thomas Woodroffe rambled on incoherently during the broadcast, repeatedly shouting, “the fleet is lit up!” The fleet was not the only thing “lit up” that night. Woodroffe had met up with some old Navy colleagues before the broadcast and the conviviality had apparently been too much for him. The BBC temporarily removed Woodroffe from his broadcasting privileges, *The Times*, May 28, 1937. The clip can be heard on “BBC: History of the BBC, Thomas Woodroffe at the Coronation Fleet Review 20 May 1937,” BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0208j3q> (accessed January 30, 2019).

²³⁹ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 21.

²⁴⁰ *The Times*, May 21, 1937.

This scene illustrates how the development of air power helped to alter the meaning of naval display during the interwar period and make it difficult for organizers to control perception. Aircraft often stole the show. After lamenting the weak showing of the Navy at the Silver Jubilee Fleet Review, *The Times*' noted that the one saving grace of the performance was the Fleet Air Arm, which seemed modern and powerful.²⁴¹ The display of seaborne naval power at the Coronation Naval Review two years later was generally received more favorably, with Edward Balloch of the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* even calling it “the most inspiring naval spectacle ever staged;” however, he also called the fly past of the Fleet Air Arm “the most spectacular sight of all.”²⁴² This exact fear was expressed by officials at the Admiralty while preparing the program for the fleet review in 1935. The Admiralty wanted to stage a demonstration of naval anti-aircraft fire at the review, but they were concerned that such a demonstration might not actually serve their purposes:

Unless and until the target is brought down a pom pom firing is not impressive and, with present fuzes and experience, a barrage is, to my mind, more of a deterrent to the pilot than a means of destruction to the aeroplane. *A target flying safely through a large volume of fire may give a wrong impression.*²⁴³

In addition, a memo expressed fear that a bad showing of naval anti-aircraft fire would “give a handle for the “I told you so” attitude to all the papers who have been harping on the supremacy of Air Power over Naval Power.”²⁴⁴

The same problem confronted producers at Navy Week. Some of the most popular aspects at Navy Week featured the use of aircraft. The 1937 Portsmouth Navy Week featured

²⁴¹ Ibid, July 16, 1935.

²⁴² *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, May 21, 1937.

²⁴³ ADM 116/3022. Italics my own.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

the demonstration of an aerial gas-bomb attack on the port. Unsurprisingly, the demonstration showed the attack to be ineffectual.²⁴⁵ This was a safe demonstration, both literally and figuratively. The producers could benefit from the *frisson* of horror produced by gas, while also assuring spectators that this method of aerial attack would ultimately fail. Similarly, the 1935 Portsmouth Navy Week featured a demonstration of ships successfully repelling an air attack.²⁴⁶ The *Portsmouth Evening News* observed, however, that at the 1936 Portsmouth Navy Week:

aerial manoeuvres of the six Blackburn Baffin R.A.F. aeroplanes, which daily during Navy Week swoop down on the Dockyard in imitation of an air raid, are watched by a far larger audience than that composed of visitors to Navy Week. [. . .] all stop to watch the machines. From this demonstration may be gleaned a good idea of how terrifying a real air raid could be.²⁴⁷

This is perhaps as perfect a metaphor as one can find in the interwar period for the Royal Navy's relationship with the public: a public still in love with their Navy, but unable to keep their eyes from wandering. A couple of years earlier, the *Portsmouth Evening News* observed that Navy Week appealed to “a rollicking, jolly, and typically English crowd, revelling in the fact that here was History and Romance.” In the same article, however, the paper suggested it was obvious that “that England is definitely becoming air-minded.”²⁴⁸

In one sense, the excitement elicited by aircraft was, indeed, excitement about the Royal Navy and something of which the Navy should have been proud; after all, the aircraft on display were pulled from the Fleet Air Arm and naval power had grown to encompass airborne components since the beginning of the twentieth century. In other words, no

²⁴⁵ *The Times*, February 26, 1937.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, April 24, 1935.

²⁴⁷ *Portsmouth Evening News*, August 8, 1936.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, August 10, 1934.

inherent contradiction existed between supporting naval aviation and naval power in general. However, two factors complicate this assumption. One, responsibility for the Fleet Air Arm was shared between the Admiralty and the Air Ministry after the Trenchard-Keyes agreement of 1924 and through 1939.²⁴⁹ Thus, a win for the Fleet Air Arm was far from ideal; in fact, it could potentially even be counter-productive, since it might encourage observers to think that the current scheme, which the Navy found intolerable, was actually working. The Royal Navy's cognizance of this is supported by their enthusiasm in showing off the Fleet Air Arm for the Navy Weeks planned for 1939, the year in which the Royal Navy gained complete control of the Fleet Air Arm.²⁵⁰ Unfortunately, that year's Navy Week had to be canceled due to the mounting tensions preceding the Second World War. Two, the excitement elicited by aircraft could be looked at in a broader way as providing evidence of, and stimulus to, the "airmindedness" of the British public. Instead of seeing the Fleet Air Arm as a useful component to a balanced Navy, might the public instead see the "spectacular" aircraft as superseding the need for ships altogether? Bernard Acworth harshly criticized the Royal Navy for its cognitive dissonance:

With one voice the Navy proclaims (*pianissimo*) the ridiculous exaggeration that surrounds all aerial propaganda, and with the same voice (*fortissimo*) it proclaims the dawn of the Air Age at sea and the outstanding importance of the Naval Air Arm! [. . .] [I]t must be assumed that the prodigious expenditure on carriers reveals that

²⁴⁹ Till, *Air Power and the Royal Navy*, 191.

²⁵⁰ *The Times*, April 28, 1939. Christopher Bell makes this point as well, but he makes the minor error of implying these planned Navy Weeks actually took place. While the *decision* to give full control of the Fleet Air Arm to the Royal Navy was made with the Inskip Report in 1937, the actual *transfer* did not take place until May 1939. For the correct timeline, see Fleet Air Arm, Naval Aviation, Royal Navy Air Service History, "Fleet Air Arm Officers Association," <https://www.fleetairarma.org/fleet-air-arm-history-timeline> (accessed May 30, 2020). This confusion between the date of the decision for transfer and the date of the completion of the transfer is repeated in numerous sources. See Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, 177; John Buckley, "Contradictions in British Defence Policy, 110; and Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 288.

naval criticism of extravagant aerial claims is half-hearted, and that the Navy's belief in a vast aerial future is much the same as the belief of those whose livelihood and prestige depend absolutely upon the sustenance of this queer modern myth. [. . .] [T]he great outlay of naval funds on aircraft carriers confirms the public in the view that naval criticism of the Air Ministry is the pathetic and expiring cry of a jealous, worn-out, and medieval service.²⁵¹

Such were the problems facing naval promoters in the 1930s; while they had to use the aircraft to compete with the spectacular displays put on by the RAF at Hendon, the use of the aircraft ultimately blurred or diluted their message. The presence of aircraft at naval displays illustrates how the essential and symbolic qualities of ships and aircraft helped to determine their reception as stage actors in this military theater. Neither machine was a mere tool for organizers to use in order to manipulate a reaction from the public. The emergence of aircraft complicated the task of staging fleet reviews that demonstrated the full-blown naval strength of the nation while also not harming the Navy's claim to greater public support vis-à-vis the RAF.

In his article on the HMS *Hood*, Ralph Harrington notes how the *Hood* “represented in microcosm what the empire itself was supposed to be: ordered, efficient, purposeful, self-contained, magnificent but humane, powerful but benign.”²⁵² Harrington is not necessarily making any special claims for the *Hood*; in fact, his central argument is that the *Hood* was not as special of a ship as it seemed to be. Instead, what Harrington is getting at is that ships *qua* ships were able to represent power, inclusiveness, order, and “ceaseless watchfulness.”²⁵³ The ship was incredibly well-equipped to deliver the message of imperial unity and the

²⁵¹ Acworth, *The Navy and the Next War*, 163.

²⁵² Harrington, “The Mighty Hood,” 180.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, 179.

displays were received by many as much needed reminders of the Navy's importance. One observer noted that Fleet Reviews helped remind Britons of their Navy, which was “hardly ever seen or seen only symbolically.”²⁵⁴ This last quote gets to one of the central problems facing naval supporters during the 1930s; ships were benign enough to serve as symbols of unity and shared prosperity, yet they were also seemingly so passive as to elicit neglect. Harrington notes that the ship underlined the “power and beneficence of the imperial overlord” to colonized “native populations,” while symbolizing “a remote and intangible homeland” for white colonists.²⁵⁵ Applying this insight to the metropole would require a few alterations, but it can still be instructive. British colonials would probably not find the technological capabilities of any of the ships in Britain's arsenal as impressive as did “native populations” simply due to the latter's relative lack of exposure. The power of the *Hood's* searchlights, according to reports at the time, “unnerved the more-than-ordinarily superstitious among the tribes dwelling beyond the mountains” of Sierra Leone.²⁵⁶ The “power” of ships, however, would have been and, indeed appeared to be, far from a standout feature to British and British settler eyes. This still leaves Harrington's insight, however, that the ship symbolized “an intangible homeland” to white colonists abroad. These colonists, or their ancestors, had emigrated from Britain to the far-flung reaches of the Empire, willingly or unwillingly, via ships. Indeed, this passage often became a fundamental component of colonial identity: a sort of literal “rite of passage.” Referring specifically to trans-Atlantic

²⁵⁴ *The Times*, July 17, 1935.

²⁵⁵ Harrington, “The Mighty Hood,” 181.

²⁵⁶ Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy*, 140.

voyages to the New World, Stephen Berry suggests “the ocean wrought human culture even as it transmitted it.”²⁵⁷ Likewise, for British migrants in transit to Australia, “memories of Britain's imperial past,” according to Bill Schwartz, “informed the ways in which migrants made sense of their own experiences.”²⁵⁸ The ship became the tie that bonded British colonists back to their homeland; a tie that many settlers grasped onto with desperation in the face of corrupting, uncivilized forces on the colonial frontier. As Daniel Owen Spence has observed, “wherever a British naval base or warship was present, the service occupied a prominent position in the social life of the colony and in disseminating British imperial culture.” Ship decks hosted banquets, parties, and balls, which became sites of “intimate civil-naval” interactions that helped “to preserve the manners and customs of the old country.”²⁵⁹

The ship, in its ability “to accommodate,” was a symbol of domesticity. Since the royal family actually visited various ships at the Coronation Fleet Review, it is not surprising that newspapers reported on them doing so; however, what the newspapers had to say is revealing. The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* asserted that “her Majesty with her keen eye for domestic detail” would not have found a speck of dirt on any of the ships she toured. The paper went on to add that the cleanliness of the ships “would have made even the most exacting housewife raise her hands in admiration and envy.”²⁶⁰ Likewise, *The Times* went to great pains to detail the experience of young Princess Elizabeth on board HMS *Victory*, even

²⁵⁷ Stephen Berry, *A Path in the Mighty Waters: Shipboard Life and Atlantic Crossings to the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 7.

²⁵⁸ Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World: Memories of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59-60.

²⁵⁹ Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy*, 92-93.

²⁶⁰ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, May 21, 1937.

going so far as to discuss her budding friendship with the ship's cat.²⁶¹ Even before the First World War, ships were typically noted for their “quiet grandeur” and “stillness,” while airplanes were often thought of as fascinating, dynamic, and even discomfoting.²⁶² The *Portsmouth Evening News* observed at the 1927 Portsmouth Navy Week that “Ladies, who on land would have been horrified at such a suggestion, gallantly climbed flimsy looking steel ladders. Many hundreds of housewives and housewives-to-be had a most enjoyable and instructive time in the spacious kitchens of the ship.”²⁶³ “A ship as a home,” the *Portsmouth Evening News* would later suggest, “has always had a romantic attraction for the most landlubbering of Britons, and when that weapon of war as it is, becomes a guest house without any of the disturbing discomforts of the sea itself, it is considered a good thing by Mr., Mrs., Miss and Master Briton.”²⁶⁴ Rear-Admiral F.L. Tottenham wondered with great pride “whether it could happen in any other Navy than the British that a grey-haired woman could wander alone round a display on three afternoons and meet such politeness everywhere.”²⁶⁵

The sailors of the Royal Navy did not always have such a reputation for civility. Jane Austen has Louisa Musgrove rhapsodize about the Royal Navy in *Persuasion*:

[Louisa] burst forth into raptures of admiration and delight on the character of the navy; their friendliness, their brotherliness, their openness, their uprightness; protesting that she was convinced of sailors having more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England; that they only knew how to live, and they only deserved to be respected and loved.²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ *The Times*, May 21, 1937.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, June 26, 1911 and July 20, 1914.

²⁶³ *Portsmouth Evening News*, August 18, 1927.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, July 29, 1937.

²⁶⁵ *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette*, August 11, 1934.

²⁶⁶ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 92.

Of course, this praise is balanced by the prejudices of Sir Walter Elliot, who sneers at the Navy for “bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction,” but *Persuasion* represents a defense of the merits of Royal Navy officers in the immediate glow of post-Napoleonic era naval triumph.²⁶⁷ Still, while heroes like Nelson were apotheosized in grand style, Jack Tar typically remained the subject of caricature. As Robert Colls puts it, “Ships and captains were the heroes, and great sweeping seascapes the playground, while Jack [Tar] had existed as a fantastical, sentimental, plebeian, sort of low life.”²⁶⁸ The “process of taming the deviance of the sailor” or the common Jack Tar took more time. Mary Conley has shown how the drunken, unruly “Jolly Jack Tar” of the early Victorian era became the “domesticated Jack Tar” by the Edwardian era.²⁶⁹ *The Portsmouth Evening News* described the average sailor found at Navy Week as “cheery, helpful, tolerant with the ignorant, mildly leg-pulling, inoffensively familiar.”²⁷⁰ Symbols of respectability, competence, and manliness, these were exactly the type of men you would want escorting your “grey-haired” grandmother around the docks. While the late nineteenth century witnessed the domestication of sailors, the interwar period saw the domestication of the ships themselves. Jan Rüger has called the Edwardian fleet “a realm of masculinity” and the warships themselves “metaphors of masculinity,” but the interwar period witnessed a breakdown of this gendered division. This breakdown relied upon and reaffirmed the sexism of the press and the Royal Navy, who equated domesticity, passivity, and comfort with women. *The Western Morning News and*

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 20.

²⁶⁸ Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 239.

²⁶⁹ Mary Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing Naval Manhood in the British Empire, 1870-1918* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2009), 3.

²⁷⁰ *The Portsmouth Evening News*, July 29, 1937.

Daily Gazette described how the Navy transformed a carrier's hangars at Plymouth Navy Week “into ball-rooms, with illuminated fountains and festoons of flags” and how “ladies were instructed in the undomestic art of manning a gun, training it on a target, and firing it.”²⁷¹ “Undomestic” this might be, but the discussion of women, and housewives in particular, being at home at Navy Week and on board ships became a trope during the interwar period and something not found in discussions of the British Army or RAF. The relationship between gender and the Royal Navy during the interwar period is complex and deserving of more research. The conclusions and associations made here are mere sketches, but the domestication of the fleet nevertheless raises questions about the public's understanding of the Royal Navy's role in the very un-domestic world of warfare.²⁷²

The producers and advocates of Navy Week believed (or hoped) that they would “enable the public not only to obtain enlightenment about the Silent Service but to form sound views upon its practical value and vital importance.”²⁷³ Yet press accounts wondered whether these housewives and the British public in general were capable of understanding the message(s) on display. The *Portsmouth Evening News* printed an intentionally comical dialogue of a conversation between the “average” husband and wife at Navy Week: “I like the look of the *Nelson* and I think she's well worth keeping.” Here his wife chipped in with “Yes, they were all wonderful *boats!* Very modern.”²⁷³ The writer wondered “just how many

²⁷¹ Ibid, August 3, 1935.

²⁷² Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 194. This subject deserves its own study, but one factor might simply be the increased visibility of women in politics. Many women earned the right to vote in 1918 and in 1928 women earned the right to vote on equal terms with men. The public staging of the Navy was always political. It should not be a surprise that this staging would change as the electorate changed.

²⁷³ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, August 4, 1933.

Navy Week sightseers are looking at the question of naval disarmament like this.”²⁷⁴ The *Portsmouth Evening News* printed another invented dialogue between a man and his barber on the subject of the Disarmament Conference: “You've been reading a lot about this conference? The barber: You bet. If we don't keep an eye on 'em, we shall have no blinkin' Navy left; and then what are we going to do for Navy Weeks?”²⁷⁵ The Royal Navy and the supportive press worried about message control. Naval displays, with the exception of the one-off Greenwich Night Pageant, mostly relied upon the spectator to view and “read” the ships themselves rather than be fed a narrative through pageantry or demonstration as was the case at military tattoos and air displays. The *Portsmouth Evening News* admitted that “it is usual for the people who know the least about the Navy to be the most attracted. This in itself is quite harmless, but they are able to be misleading to their own kin and amusing to the more enlightened when they begin “explaining things.””²⁷⁶

Most observers admitted that Navy Week could not compete with the “spectacular” elements on display at military tattoos and air displays.²⁷⁷ One letter to the editor in the *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette* suggested that the mere viewing of a “big gun” did not excite “John Citizen.” Instead, Navy Week needed “to throw in an air-raid with the anti-aircraft guns barking their muzzles off; have a naval detachment storming a fort or running up with the guns; let there be noise and much orderly commotion; and, as far as possible, “say it with the bugles and the bands.””²⁷⁸ In other words, Navy Week needed to be more like

²⁷⁴ *Portsmouth Evening News*, August 8, 1932.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, January 25, 1930.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, August 17, 1927.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid*, June 29, 1934.

²⁷⁸ *The Western Morning News and Daily Gazette*, August 22, 1933.

the Aldershot Tattoo and the RAF Display. This is one observer's opinion made at a time when Navy Week suffer a brief dip in popularity, but it is undeniable that naval spectacle differed from army and air force spectacle in its basic stillness.

Conclusion.

The naval stage was revived in the 1920s and 1930s, but producers found a fundamentally different and more complicated environment after the First World War.²⁷⁹ The Royal Navy could no longer simply offer a “public acclamation of the monarch” or put on a grand show for an eager audience. The First World War shattered British conceptions about the role of naval power and chastened the public's belief in their Navy as a means of defense and deterrence. The Navy attempted to use the “naval theatre” adeptly to secure public support during a time of fiscal austerity and inter-service rivalries for funding. Admiralty records suggest a Navy desperately struggling to position itself against the rival services, especially the RAF, to maintain its status as Britain's “Senior Service.” Duncan Redford argues that disinterest in the Royal Navy “was clearly growing in the interwar years.”²⁸⁰ The RAF, it is true, eventually won the public fight for funding. In the two years leading up to the start of the Second World War, the RAF received £239,502,490 of funding while the navy only received £225,255,312. Over the course of the preceding decade, Air Force expenditure increased 600%, while naval expenditure increased by less than 200%.²⁸¹ Of course, provided the fiscal limitations of the British state in this period, even these increases seem rather impressive; furthermore, as the Air Force was still the junior service and still in its formative

²⁷⁹ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 11.

²⁸⁰ Redford, “The Royal Navy, Sea Blindness and British National Identity,” 62.

²⁸¹ Malcolm Smith, *British Air Strategy Between the Wars*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 336.

stages at the beginning of this period, it is to be expected that funding for this branch would increase at a faster rate than the Royal Navy, the established senior service in the British military hierarchy. Nevertheless, the numbers are worse for the Navy than they might at first appear. Due to the restrictions of the 1922 Washington and 1930 London Naval Treaties (which limited naval construction by establishing ratios between countries by tonnage and ship type), the Royal Navy possessed a fleet desperately in need of modern and technologically up-to-date ships. Much of the funding allocated to the Navy, while still substantial, went to support an already large stockpile of older military equipment: the Navy, to a large extent, was simply being kept afloat (pardon the pun). By contrast, the money allocated to the Royal Air Force was largely used to obtain new, up-to-date aircraft.²⁸²

While the absolute amounts spent on the two services were not markedly different, it was quite clear that these amounts reflected changes in the relative statuses of the two services in British national defense planning. Indeed, according to Paul Kennedy, the relative decline in funding for the Navy represented “a tacit admission that the navy's claim to be the Senior Service had now been rejected.”²⁸³ Still, these figures undoubtedly remain a crude way to estimate popular esteem and the naval displays of the interwar period tell a slightly different story than the one laid out by Duncan Redford. Instead of seeing the Royal Navy as suffering a period of popular *decline*, it might be better to argue for an important *shift* in perception. The popularity of these displays indicate that Britons still perceived the fleet as a symbol of pride and even beauty, but they could no longer associate power with the benign,

²⁸² While it is true that aircraft became obsolete faster than ships during this period, it should be noted that the Hurricanes and Spitfires that were featured well into the middle and even the end of the Second World War were first produced in 1935 and 1936 respectively.

²⁸³ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 286.

domesticated stillness of the ship. That age had been destroyed by the First World War. Naval propaganda at Navy Week, fleet reviews, and the Greenwich Night Pageant all struggled with message control. While the producers of these displays succeeded in creating popular entertainment, analysis of the content and reception of this propaganda shows how the Navy failed to nudge the public towards preferred conclusions regarding questions of defense priorities. The British people still loved their Navy, but they increasingly viewed the airplane as being more suited to the task of defending the country.

Chapter Four: Flights of Imagination: Propaganda at the RAF Display and Empire Air Day

Old men who never cheated, never doubted,
Communicated monthly, sit and stare
At the new suburb stretched beyond the runway
Where a young man lands hatless from the air.

----John Betjeman, "The Death of King George V" (1936)

"The King is dead. Long live the King!" Behind this sentiment is the belief in continuity and the interchangeability of one monarch for another. Yet the death of King George V at age 70 in 1936 seemed to represent the dawn of a new age. Rudyard Kipling and John Betjeman penned poems to mark the occasion and both took the opportunity to remark upon a changing Britain. Kipling focused on Britain's imperial decline, while Betjeman focused on how much Britain had moved away from the traditional world represented by King George V. The "young man" landing "hatless from the air" in Betjeman's "The Death of King George V" is most likely King Edward VIII and the world Betjeman is describing is very much the world on display at Hendon in the interwar period. A world of aircraft careening above Hendon Aerodrome; a precocious age fraught with possibilities frightening to some and exhilarating to many.¹ Hendon also demonstrated the suburbanization so characteristic of the interwar period. "The new suburb stretched beyond the runway" and eventually crowded around the once relatively isolated Hendon Aerodrome so much as to

¹ Despite the increase in "air-mindedness" during the period, relatively few Britons had direct experience flying in airplanes. According to a Gallup poll conducted as late as 1937, only 13% of those sampled replied yes to a question asking them if they had ever traveled in an airplane. George H. Gallup, *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain, 1937-1975, Vol.1* (New York: Random House, 1976), 4.

make the continuation of its incredibly popular annual RAF Display a safety risk. This risk contributed to the decision to abandon the display altogether in 1938. While George V had been “the Sailor King,” Edward VIII appeared to be a man of the air and the hope of the future.² A Royal Air Force officer, air power enthusiast, and pilot, Edward often used the Hendon Aerodrome, flying himself to places on the continent and elsewhere. He even made a dramatic entrance at the RAF Display in 1934, touching down on the runway in front of an enthralled crowd.³ Edward's coming to the throne can be seen as the symbolic dethroning of the Royal Navy as the indisputable “Senior Service.” The Royal Air Force's reign at the top lasted longer than Edward's, but both reigns began with hopes that remained largely unfulfilled.

In *The Next War in the Air*, Brett Holman notes the popularity of the RAF Display, but wonders “how far this resulted from or contributed to an understanding of airpower.” For Holman, the popularity of the event may have stemmed simply from “love of spectacle.”⁴ By looking more closely at the content of interwar displays and their reception, I argue that while aerial spectacle was incredibly popular, the organizers of these displays faced some of the same problems that organizers faced at Navy Week and military tattoos. While the ship belonged to the past, the airplane conjured the future; a future whose limitations still seemed up in the air, so to speak. The appeal of air displays stemmed from more than the mere spectacle of it all. While most scholars have focused on the right-wing appeal of air power in

² Graves and Hodge, *The Long Week-End*, 118.

³ “Account by B.H. Best, London United Press Union,” X003-1844, RAF Museum (London).

⁴ Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Britain's Fear of the Bomber, 1908-1941* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 170.

the 1920s and 1930s, the popularity of the RAF Display suggests a much broader ideological base; a base that spans the spectrum from left to right. Air power was a sort of blank canvas that appealed to almost everyone at the time on some level, if they cared to think about it at all. The RAF Display and the displays at Empire Air Days (the successor to the RAF Display) in the late 1930s helped contribute to a generalized sense of “air-mindedness,” but they did little to contribute to a realistic appraisal of aerial warfare, much less to a popular understanding of RAF doctrine. These displays can help us understand both how the RAF won the very public battle for more government spending and how the air war that eventually did come ended up looking so different from the one expected.

“General Blitzenscooter” or the “Mad Mullah”?

Spectacular aerial displays started at aviation pioneer Claude Grahame-White's Hendon Aerodrome (known as the London Aerodrome at the time) even before the First World War. Nine air displays were held at the aerodrome before the war, including the first ever displays held at night. Grahame-White estimated that approximately one million spectators watched fifty-one races held at the aerodrome in 1913 alone.⁵ Interrupted by the First World War, these spectacles returned to Hendon in 1920 when the newly independent RAF held its first Aerial Pageant. The RAF Aerial Pageant (renamed the RAF Display after 1924) became a popular sensation during the interwar period, outstripping all other aerial attractions and setting new records for attendance at an outdoor event charging admission.⁶ By the end of its run after the 1937 Display, more than 4,000,000 people had attended.

⁵ Andrew Renwick, *RAF Hendon: The Birthplace of Aerial Power* (Manchester: Crécy, 2013), 30-31.

⁶ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 29, 1931.

Hendon had come to mark the London Season as much as any other event.⁷ The organizers of aerial displays hoped to stoke “air-mindedness” and gain public support for the fledgling RAF. Indeed, the Hendon airshows helped establish expectations and fears about future aerial warfare for many of those millions in attendance.

The first post-war pageant held at Hendon in 1920 brought out more than 40,000 spectators to see races, aerobatic flying, aerial duels, and a simulated destruction of a village. Organized by Sir John Salmond, Air Officer Commanding Inland Area, the Pageant sought to give a display of the RAF's annual training. The Royal Tournament at Olympia served this purpose for the Royal Navy and the Army, but the RAF could not give an effective display in such an enclosed space. Like the organizers of military tattoos and Navy Week, however, the organizers of the Hendon Pageant sought to do more than simply provide the public a chance to see the RAF show off their training. In 1924, the Under-Secretary of State for Air formally provided the rationale for the RAF Display: one, to provide an opportunity for an annual review to check on the efficiency and skill of the service; two, “to allow the greatest possible number of the population of this Empire to witness the display and thus to be enabled to see for themselves the functions of the R.A.F.”; and three, to provide funds for various RAF charities.⁸ The RAF became the world's first independent air arm in 1918, but the Air Ministry felt itself under attack during post-war retrenchment and throughout much of the interwar period. The Air Ministry believed the RAF Display would “enable the public to

⁷ *The Daily Herald*, January 21, 1938.

⁸ Between 1920 and 1937, the average net profits at Hendon distributed to various charities ranged between £5,000-15,000 per year. T 225/791.

appreciate the developments that are constantly taking place in the aerial arm.”⁹ In addition, a popular show, in Sir John Salmond's opinion, would prove that the public was still behind the idea of a strong, independent air arm.¹⁰

While the Royal Navy and the Army struggled to represent the First World War in a way that would demonstrate the value of their respective services to Britain's modern defense, the Royal Air Force quickly moved on from any focus on the First World War whatsoever. The 1921 RAF Aerial Pageant included the first major “set piece,” in this case a “realistic” air raid on a picturesque fake German village complete with a massive church spire occupied by a dastardly General Blitzenscooter and his army.¹¹ At this first set piece, the RAF showed what it *wanted* the lessons of the First World War to be rather than a fair reflection of the role the RAF *actually* played in the First World War. It is not all that surprising that this set piece demonstrated the destruction of an army and its chain of command without any help from soldiers on the ground. Unlike the Army at Aldershot, however, the RAF appears to have chosen without much outside pressure to move on from the depiction of events, real or not, from the First World War. The next year, the RAF shifted its focus to the Empire and the use of air power in “colonial policing.” This is not to say, however, that the organizers at Hendon never faced political pressure to be careful about the reproduction of events from the First World War. In 1937, a report put together by the organizers of the RAF Display explained how political concerns led to a particularly confusing display:

⁹ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, May 29, 1922.

¹⁰ *The Times*, July 5, 1920.

¹¹ *Ibid*, June 30, 1921.

The original intention was to reproduce an episode [an attack on kite balloons] of the Great War under the title of “Historical Event.” Political factors prevented the fulfilment of this purpose and prohibited any mention of the hostile aircraft used. The event was thus not clear to the spectators generally. The interest shown in the old type of aircraft, however, justified their inclusion in the programme.¹²

Just what these “political factors” were is unclear, but the RAF benefited in some ways from being an infant service. The RAF did not need to justify its performance in the First World War to the same extent as the other two established services. Most people recognized that the Great War had only just suggested the potential of air power.

While the RAF Displays and, especially, Empire Air Day sought to emphasize the aircraft's ability to link the Empire more closely together, the vision of the Empire that emerges from these displays is ultimately quite different from that of the Navy or Army displays.¹³ In the Official Souvenir for 1935's Empire Air Day, Lord Londonderry, the Secretary of State for Air, suggested that aviation would link the empire together more effectively than ever and promote “mutual understanding.”¹⁴ In the early years of the independent RAF, “colonial policing” and the idea of “substitution” helped to legitimize the RAF's independent existence. Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard and other leaders at the Air Ministry and Air Staff convinced British governments that the Air Force could “police” or “control” the new territories of the Middle East won (or at least claimed) by the British as mandates after the First World War at a far lower cost than the Army.¹⁵ Priya Satia has argued

¹² “Report on Hendon Display, 1937,” AIR 2/4444.

¹³ Ibid, May 24, 1934; Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 18 April 1934 vol 288 cc950-1.

¹⁴ “Souvenir for Empire Air Day 1935,” AIR 2/4449.

¹⁵ David Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 211. A copy of the Air Staff's 1921 Paper on “The Role of the Air Force in the System of Imperial Defence” is included in “Appendix G” of Ian Philpott, *The Royal Air Force, An Encyclopaedia of the Inter-war Years, Vol. 1: The Trenchard Years, 1918-1929* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword

that “air policing” was a fitting strategy for the “covert empire” Britain developed during the interwar period. This style of imperial rule was “invisible, barely existing on paper, designed for an increasingly anti-imperialist postwar world.”¹⁶

“Air policing,” however, was not kept secret. The government stepped in to provide propaganda, with the demonstrations at Hendon being a notable example. The RAF Displays whitewashed the violence perpetrated against colonized peoples, exploiting it for its entertainment value. According to Satia, the Air Staff used “the otherworldly qualities” of Arabia as “a means of selling the new warfare to the public by exhibiting it in a famously romantic and chivalric place where, it was known, the bourgeois rules lately exposed by the war as utterly bankrupt did not apply anyway.”¹⁷ The state nevertheless, as Satia notes, did not trust the British public to come to the right conclusions. “Emerging at the same moment as the new postwar mass democracy,” Satia argues, “the techniques of covert empire were designed to evade both the Iraqi and the British public.”¹⁸ This same skepticism about the public's ability to support the right policies was evinced by the military services in their competition for government support. As Satia suggests and other scholars have argued, a new justification for empire was emerging in this period. The development of the League of

Aviation, 2005). This Paper made a blunt case for “replacement,” stating, “Certain responsibilities assigned to the Navy and the Army could be more economically and just as adequately carried out by air units, notably the maintenance of order in certain areas of unrest in the Middle East.” In 1921, the first year of “air control” in Iraq, the British reduced their expenditure from about £20.1 million to £6.6 million. Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 173.

¹⁶ Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundation of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7-9. See also Priya Satia, “The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia,” *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 1 (February 2006): 16-51.

¹⁷ Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 252-253.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 288.

Nations mandate system explicitly spelled out a justification for empire based upon the development of a territory for the benefit of its native people. This limited the government's ability to engage openly in “muscular imperialism.”¹⁹ In response to public curiosity and criticism, over time the state and its colonial agents swept more and more of the empire's operations in the Middle East under the rug.²⁰ The Middle East became a center of new thinking about the Empire, but the anti-colonial rebellions of the early 1920s made it difficult to support the idea that the Empire was good for colonial subjects.

As Satia suggests, displays of colonial policing in the exotic Middle East might have served to blunt “the sense of total rapture with the prewar past.” Proven by the appeal of “Lawrence of Arabia” (1888-1935), the Middle East invited Englishmen to “escape the bonds of too much civilization to recover a noble, free, democratic spirit lost to “utilitarian” England.”²¹ While the British Army and Royal Navy transported viewers back in time to recover the heroic in battle, the RAF transported viewers through space to recover the heroic in “a region conceived in its very essence as a space for the imagination.”²² In dealing with the Empire, the naval and army displays tended to focus on the “settler colonies” and, to a lesser extent, India. The air displays, on the other hand, focused on the newer, non-white

¹⁹ Susan Pedersen, “Modernity and Trusteeship: Tensions of Empire in Britain between the Wars,” in *Moments of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II*, edited by Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 214-217.

²⁰ Interestingly enough, Bernard Porter makes a similar argument in explaining what he calls “popular ignorance of and apathy towards the empire” in the interwar years. For Porter, the “practical imperialists” understood “the lack of support for and even interest in the empire of the majority of their compatriots. [. . .] The officials seemed quite content to keep colonial policy a mystery, which only a small priesthood, selected from a restricted class of society, could understand. They did not want the hoi polloi sharing it with them.” Good historians coming from different perspectives often meet each other halfway. Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, 273.

²¹ Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 8, 257.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

portions of the Empire that were often controlled via air power. The demonstrations of colonial policing at Hendon were often tinged with racism and crude stereotypes.²³ They usually involved “British bombers swooping down upon vicious but bewildered “natives,” who were often given comically foreign-sounding names (the “Mad Mullah,” the “Wot Knotts,” etc.) and surrounded by exotic enough mock-up buildings.²⁴ The names of the “combatants” were provided in programmes and announced over the loudspeaker at the event. At the 1923 RAF Aerial Pageant, RAF servicemen “played the part of hostile dervishes with amusing fidelity” before being bombed into submission.²⁵ The RAF's vision of empire was one explicitly built on force and surveillance rather than goodwill and mutual interest. Sanguinary rather than sanguine, the Hendon Displays rarely displayed the visions of Lord Londonderry.

Demonstrations at Hendon sought to respond to current events, sometimes more obviously than others. The 1927 RAF Display demonstrated the “rescue of the British population from a barbarian town where their safety has been endangered by a revolutionary mob.”²⁶ Considering the RAF's involvement in handling the General Strike of 1926, placing this set piece in a fictional “barbarian town” helped the RAF to place itself behind the generic

²³ Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, 110. Omissi points out, however, that air power enthusiasts tended to argue *against* racial difference, or at least against the innate inferiority of colonized peoples. Instead, they sought to emphasize “not the uniqueness of the people being bombed but the uniqueness of the bomber itself.” Whether this racial sensibility was relayed to the spectators at Hendon is doubtful, which speaks to the difficulty of presenting air power theory to the public.

²⁴ David Omissi, “The Hendon Air Pageant, 1920-1937,” in *Popular Imperialism and the Military, 1850-1950*, edited by John MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 204.

²⁵ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, July 2, 1923.

²⁶ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, May 30, 1927.

forces of order without emphasizing its role in a specific event in Britain's recent past.²⁷ In 1929, the set piece at Hendon demonstrated the destruction of a seaport and provided commentary on the League of Nations. The set piece suggested that support from the League of Nations could not come in time to protect British interests in a border dispute; as a result, the RAF preemptively intervened to defend British interests.²⁸ Satia and Pedersen both agree that the public found the more violent aspects of imperialism distasteful. The extent to which the spectators at Hendon found the demonstration of “muscular imperialism” distasteful, however, is hard to determine. While it is true that the 1930 RAF Display substituted “Pirates” flying the “Jolly Roger” for “tribesmen” as bombing targets in “deference to public opinion,” demonstrations of colonial policing carried on after 1930 and into the late 1930s.²⁹ The 1933 RAF Display's bombing demonstration apparently made a strong impression on Iraq's King Feisal, while the 1934 Display likewise featured a demonstration of the methods of colonial policing.³⁰ As David Omissi points out, demonstrations of air policing began to take center stage less often during the mid-1930s. Omissi suggests a changing set of foreign policy concerns and a reluctance to show off the more aggressive uses of the RAF during the Geneva Disarmament Conference from 1932-1934.³¹ As late as 1936, however, the RAF was still defending the use of set pieces dealing with the bombing of “native villages.” In

²⁷ Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, 41; Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality: The Evolution of British and American Ideas About Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 74. The government employed airplanes to distribute the government newspaper, *British Gazette*, and to drop tear-gas canisters.

²⁸ *The Times*, July 15, 1929.

²⁹ *Daily Herald*, June 13, 1930.

³⁰ *The Times*, June 26, 1933; June 30, 1934.

³¹ Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, 59, 182.

response to a question from a Labour MP, Under-Secretary of State for Air Sir Philip Sassoon argued that the presentation of such a scene would unlikely “be misunderstood by public opinion in this country or elsewhere.”³² Nevertheless, the RAF Displays had by the late 1930s generally moved on from the early years which had focused on colonial policing. The RAF and the Empire had been tied at the hip in the early years of the RAF's existence, but the relationship between the two had always been transactional.

John MacKenzie has argued that imperialism suffused British culture during the late 19th and early 20th centuries via the troika of “devotion to the monarchy, Social Darwinism/racism, and militarism.” Examination of these displays “de-clusters” this group. Militarism has a distinct history and relationship with each military branch and should be understood as being both more and less than imperialism. Understood simply as enthusiasm for military exploits, militarism could of course encourage imperialistic fervor through the depiction of past imperial military triumphs. This process could also be reversed, however, with imperialism being used to bolster militarism at home. Each service used the Empire at displays to bolster support not for the Empire *per se*, but for their particular service. Sometimes the use of the Empire worked, other times organizers deemed it counterproductive or too indirect. Force is implicit in empire. Since militaries apply force outside of the metropole (and sometimes within as well), imperialism and the military are necessarily tied at the hip. Militarism, however, is more than simply enthusiasm for the use of military force, with pacifism as its opposite binary; it is also in a binary relationship with

³² *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 26, 1936.

Vagts's "civilianism." This definition of militarism refers to the desire to carry the "military mentality and modes of acting and decision into the civilian sphere."³³ The desire to create a militarized or regimented society is not dependent on an imperial agenda, although they can be complementary.

The air fleet created by the RAF's expansion program after 1933 would fundamentally reshape the nature of the RAF Display. As the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* would put it in 1937: "At Hendon, the individual pilot has had his day; he has been replaced by the big formation."³⁴ The evolving content of these demonstrations at Hendon, especially the "set pieces," which were the most didactic element of any RAF Display, had less to do with popular distaste for "muscular imperialism" and more to do with a changing RAF. The rapid improvements in the capabilities of military aircraft and the sudden shifts in the air fleet's composition over the years defined the program at Hendon more than any one person or group responsible for staging the shows. Similar limitations, of course, applied to the Royal Navy and to the British Army. The British Tommy, clad in khaki and topped with a steel helmet, carried with him the historical baggage of the past. The battleship could not demonstrate its true power in a confined amount of time and space conducive to mass spectacle. The military propagandists of the age had to navigate through these historical, technological, and political obstacles in an effort to shape public opinion in their favor.

Building a New Service: Ersatz Pageantry at the RAF Aerial Pageant

³³ Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, 17.

³⁴ *Ibid*, June 28, 1937.

The popular socialist newspaper the *Daily Herald* suggested in 1922 that the RAF's "campaign about "air apathy"" was progressing nicely "and on just the same lines as the pre-war campaign for more Dreadnoughts." Just a few years later in an article about the 1926 RAF Display, the newspaper argued, "Tremendous efforts are being made by the powers that be to popularise the Air Force; the King has adopted it, the best people patronise it."³⁵ It is undeniably true that many in the RAF sought to vigorously promote their service through the use of public spectacle at Hendon and later at Empire Air Day. This does not mean, however, that some RAF officers were without reservations about the usefulness of propaganda and the difficulties involved in putting on shows while maintaining the dignity of a new military branch. In private correspondence, Lord Trenchard, Chief of the Air Staff and the man most responsible for the maintenance of an independent air force in the interwar period, complained: "I dislike any stunts at the [Hendon] display outside the ordinary programme, and the only one we give lip service to is the set-piece."³⁶ In 1924, Trenchard admitted that "one of the troubles of the Air Service is that everybody is so ready to spend energy on some side show instead of the principle thing of getting the Services equipped and thoroughly efficient."³⁷ Trenchard congratulated Sir John Salmond, the officer primarily responsible for launching the RAF Display, for "the quiet and unostentatious manner in which it was carried out."³⁸ Indeed, the Aero Club, one of the most important and vociferous voices in the interwar period in support of air power, accused the Air Ministry of having an "aversion to publicity"

³⁵ *Daily Herald*, June 26, 1922; July 5, 1926.

³⁶ "Correspondence with Ellington," April 27, 1929, MFC76/1/181, RAF Museum.

³⁷ "Letter from Trenchard to Lambert," January 8, 1924, MFC76/1/303, RAF Museum.

³⁸ "Correspondence with Salmond," March 22, 1928, MFC76/1/303, RAF Museum.

in 1928.³⁹ This is perhaps exaggerated, since similar criticisms and self-assessments can be found of the other military branches during this period as well. Each service at times imagined itself to be up against a hostile press and government or less willing to stoop to publicity than their service rivals. In a letter to Trenchard, C.G. Grey, the Editor of *The Aeroplane* magazine, wrote of the Royal Air Force's "perennial enemies, Rothermere, the *Morning Post*, and the Admiralty."⁴⁰ His lack of justification for such vilification suggests Trenchard was at least not offended by such remarks, if not of the same mind. Trenchard himself complained of his lack of "friends" in the Government before 1924.⁴¹ In a time of fiscal austerity, none of the services received as much funding or acclaim as they would have liked, but few ever do.

By the mid-1930s, however, the RAF was convinced of the importance of the displays at Hendon and at Empire Air Day. The Air Ministry took concerted and systematic steps to make these displays even more effective in shaping public opinion. After the first Empire Air Day in 1934, the RAF showed the same commitment to studying the public's reception of this new show as the Royal Navy displayed with Navy Week in the late 1930s.⁴² Each RAF station submitted a report to the Air Ministry documenting what worked and what failed to

³⁹ AIR 2/8851.

⁴⁰ "Letter from Charles Grey to Trenchard," December 22, 1925, MFC76/1/303, RAF Museum.

⁴¹ "Letter from Trenchard to Lambert," January 8, 1924, MFC76/1/303, RAF Museum. Trenchard was famously inarticulate, which makes his success in leading the RAF through these early years all the more impressive.

⁴² AIR 2/4449. While similar reports might have been filed before concerning the first Empire Air Day or previous displays at Hendon, these are the first such reports found in the archives. The systematic nature of these records coupled with those found concerning Navy Weeks suggests a sudden rise in sophistication in each branch's approach to the study of public reception and their own propaganda efforts.

hit home with the public.⁴³ Talk of abandoning the RAF Display owing to the strain it placed on personnel started as early as 1934, but the Air Ministry had by this point become convinced of its importance in affecting public opinion even during a time of expanding government funding.⁴⁴ The RAF Display and its offshoot, Empire Air Day, became much more than the “side shows” Trenchard believed such spectacles to be in the 1920s.

Organizers of the RAF Display and Empire Air Day, much like the RAF in general, had to completely invent their own forms of military pageantry in the interwar period. The Royal Navy liked to think of itself as “amateurs in the showman business” considering its history as the “Silent Service,” but the Royal Air Force was an institution without history, and therefore without pageantry.⁴⁵ The demonstrations at Hendon and Empire Air Day reveal just how much the RAF relied upon inherited forms of military spectacle. Formation flying undoubtedly constituted a vital skill in military aviation and its place at aviation displays should hardly be surprising. What is surprising, perhaps, is the language used to describe formation flying. Newspapers referred to formation flying as “aerial drill” or “flight evolutions.”⁴⁶ The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* described how the 36 airplanes flying in formation at the 1925 RAF Display “kept perfect order and went through their various movements like a regiment on parade.”⁴⁷ At the 1930 Display, “bombers flew past “dressed” almost with the precision of foot soldiers.”⁴⁸ Airplanes in formation even flew to

⁴³ “Memorandum from Air Ministry, D.S.D. W.S. Douglas,” 1937, AIR 2/4442.

⁴⁴ AIR 2/4443.

⁴⁵ 355. 16(422.3) “1933” ROY B9838. “Chatham-Sheerness Navy Week, 1933.” NMM.

⁴⁶ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 30, 1924; *The Times*, April 24, 1925;

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, June 29, 1925.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, June 11, 1930.

the accompaniment of music, even though the music could hardly play a role in keeping them “in step.”⁴⁹ “In modern war,” Scott Hughes Myerly argues, “machines have increasingly displaced dress as the show's focal point, and soldiers have become attendants for the terrible machines of death.”⁵⁰ It is at the RAF Displays of the interwar period where Myerly comes closest to the truth. The 1925 RAF Display featured “evolutions of aeroplanes” under the wireless direction of the King.⁵¹ A more direct and mechanical link between sovereign and instrument of war had heretofore never existed. One newspaper assessed how spectators responded to the “aerial drill” at the 1927 RAF Display: “Every feature was performed with a mechanical perfection so pronounced as almost to obscure the human element behindw [sic] the aerial evolutions, and probably this was a reason why there was so little applause from the spectators.”⁵² While the RAF did not abandon “aerial drill,” the use of “wireless control” did not become a regular feature. The “human element” remained too important and the organizers of the RAF Displays sought to produce a popular show not in order to demonstrate “a paradigm for social and institutional organization and discipline,” but in order to *activate* support for their military branch.⁵³

The RAF struggled to master the intricacies of military ritual in its early years. In a letter from Sir Clive Wigram, the Assistant Private Secretary and Equerry to the King, to Lord Trenchard in 1924, Wigram reminded Trenchard: “The King always inspects his troops at the order, and laid this down for the Navy and Army shortly after he came to the throne.

⁴⁹ Ibid, July 4, 1927.

⁵⁰ Myerly, *British Military Spectacle*, 281.

⁵¹ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 29, 1925.

⁵² Ibid, July 4, 1927.

⁵³ Scott Hughes Myerly, ““The Eye Must Entrap the Mind,”” 120

His Majesty wishes you to have the necessary instructions given to the Air Force.”⁵⁴ At a time when the necessity of an independent RAF still faced opposition, establishing a base line of professionalism became a priority. While the Royal Navy inherited a rhetorical and symbolic rationale rooted in liberalism, the RAF inherited the symbolic forms, rituals, and techniques of preexisting military spectacle. The Royal Navy struggled to transcend these limitations in their messaging at naval displays, but the RAF managed to do so owing to the latent symbolism of the airplane. The RAF seemed youthful almost despite itself, or at least despite the best efforts of its leadership to imbue the infant service with an ersatz appearance of heritage. March around in glittering and dazzling formation enveloped with the grandeur of Elgar as much as you want, but the buzzing noise and whip of aircraft would jerk any spectator into modernity. Young people were drawn to airplanes (and many still are to this day), something the other military branches nervously noted at the time. Just before the Second World War, the Admiralty admitted that the RAF had done a much better job of recruiting, especially in inland areas.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the British Army chronically suffered from a lack of recruits during the interwar period.⁵⁶ The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* explained why in an article on the last RAF Display in 1937: “It is clear why the Royal Air Force finds it so easy to get recruits. The air appeals to youth, and aircraft have the right modern touch about them.”⁵⁷

RAF officers liked to think of themselves as being different from army and naval

⁵⁴ “Letter from Wigram,” June 10, 1924, MFC76/1/286, RAF Museum.

⁵⁵ ADM 1/20950.

⁵⁶ Robert Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties: Politics and Profits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 79.

⁵⁷ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 26, 1937.

officers. Army and naval officers typically felt the same way. One Army officer insisted rather haughtily that it was “unseemly to go barnstorming in flying machines, in the company of cranks and exhibitionists. If a man must break his neck, let him break it on a horse, like a gentleman.”⁵⁸ T.E. Lawrence hoped to find a home in the RAF after the First World War, even attempting to find anonymity as an enlisted man with the name John Hume Ross. He failed to find the anonymity and contentment he sought, but Lawrence initially found a kindred, heroic spirit animating a young RAF:

We identify the army with its manners of life and already sincerely despise and detest it. [. . .] Soldiers are parts of a machine and their virtue is in subordinating themselves within their great company. Airmen are lords and masters, when not slaves, of their machines, which the officers indeed own in the air but which belong to us [aircraftmen] for the longer hours they are on earth.⁵⁹

The irony here is that Lawrence quite clearly joined the RAF in order to become one with the “little man,” whom he had begun to idealize, and willfully become a “cog in the machine.” After all, it was “the machine age,” and the way forward to a better society centered on improvements in mechanical science.⁶⁰ Still, Lawrence fought vainly against his own sense of self-grandeur and his broader fame with the British public. RAF propaganda at Hendon and elsewhere benefited from, and capitalized on, the “myth of the airman” that emerged during the First World War and carried into the interwar period and beyond. The airman, or aviator, appeared to many as a modern-day knight; a revolutionary hero of national or even international regeneration.⁶¹ As Joanna Bourke suggests, modernists typically elevated “the

⁵⁸ Kier, *Imagining War*, 122.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Colin Cook, “A Fascist Memory: Oswald Moseley and the Myth of the Airman,” *European Review of History* 4, Issue 2 (Autumn 1997), 147.

special man” rather than the common man after the Great War. The common man had become a victim chewed up by a faulty system, rather than the product of a functioning, praise-worthy civilization. The great man, men like T.E. Lawrence and aviators at the helm of modern wonders, could rise above such a deeply flawed civilization and lay claim to heroism still. “The air ace,” Modris Eksteins argues, “was the object of limitless envy among infantry, mired in mud and seeming helplessness.” Later, during the interwar period, Charles Lindbergh would become, in Eksteins’ words, “a symbol of the desire for a reaffirmation of values but at the same time of the profound dissatisfaction with contemporary existence. Correspondingly, the fascination with flight was an indication of a yearning to escape the banality of an age, an age that had lost its faith.”⁶² Meanwhile, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge described the two Lawrences, D.H. And T.E., as the two most symbolic figures of their age. While T.E. Lawrence seemed a great and audacious man straining (perhaps with an eye for showmanship, one might add) to elevate himself above the small-mindedness of a conformist culture, D.H. Lawrence rather embraced his own “vulgar menaces.” Both men, however, shrank from bourgeois decency and sought to create their own identities without relying upon the past.⁶³ While hardly intentionally rejecting bourgeois decency, the RAF had no other choice but to forge a new institutional identity without the baggage of history. Men like T.E. Lawrence, and many boys too, could relate.⁶⁴

⁶² Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 264-265.

⁶³ Graves and Hodge, *The Long Week-End*, 208.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 207-208. Graves and Hodge suggest that much of the Lawrences' restlessness and unhappiness was rooted in “the question of Woman.” T.E. Lawrence once wrote to Robert Graves with satisfaction that “being a mechanic cut him off from real communication with women – there were no women in the machines, in any machine – no woman could understand a mechanic's happiness in serving his bits and pieces.” To what extent other men of the age and since have found this appealing is debatable, but others have noted how

The Rise and Fall of Criticism of the RAF Display

The RAF believed that by “presenting the newness and modernity” of its air fleet, they could “offset the lack of “tradition” and the perceived social inferiority of the junior service.”⁶⁵ The RAF did not struggle as much as the other services for recruits, but it desperately craved social credibility with “the best people.” In 1936, the Secretary of State for Air, Viscount Swinton, even proposed reaching out to the great public schools in order to interest their students in joining the RAF.⁶⁶ This was only part of a much more general push by the RAF Displays to emphasize youth and modernity against the two senior services’ “blinker reaction” and “Blimpery.”⁶⁷ Schools were often invited to take their students to watch rehearsal at Hendon free of charge. 75,000 school children attended the rehearsal for the 1931 RAF Display, but only 40,000 children did so in 1933, and 17,000 in 1935.⁶⁸ Considering the steady popularity of the event, perhaps opposition from pacifist groups and school councils, which began in the late 1920s, accounts for the decline in attendance by schoolchildren. The Women's Co-Operative Guild of Leicester passed a resolution condemning “war memorials,” the Boy Scouts, and the taking of school children to Hendon.⁶⁹ In 1928, The National Council for Prevention of War lodged a complaint with the President of the Board of Education concerning the attendance of school children at a display featuring

RAF officers were often far more interested in “technical issues” than their peers in the Navy or Army. See, Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War*, 126.

⁶⁵ Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, 206.

⁶⁶ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Lords, 30 July 1936 vol 102 cc395-410.

⁶⁷ Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, 163.

⁶⁸ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 27, 1931; June 24, 1933; June 29, 1935.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, June 23, 1927. The newspaper rather blatantly tipped its hand by deriding the group as “1,000 odd women.”

the bombing of a “native village.”⁷⁰ In the same year, the Executive Committee of the Fellowship of Reconciliation adopted a resolution strongly condemning the practice of having children attend rehearsals at Hendon and Aldershot.⁷¹ Rennie Smith, Labour MP, criticized the practice as well, declaring he did not want “the minds of children [. . .] drawn into romantic military displays.”⁷² The London County Council Education Committee took the drastic step of forbidding the attendance of children at military displays with a resolution passed in March of 1935. This might explain the drastic drop off in the number of attendees at the 1935 RAF Display rehearsal since school children from London must have made up the vast majority of those in attendance.⁷³

Unsurprisingly, the aerobatics of the RAF in rehearsal were quite a hit with children. *The Times* noted that after the rehearsal for the 1936 RAF Display, “the young people were still cheering as their coaches started for home.”⁷⁴ Indeed, their very youth seemed to give them greater expertise as spectators in the same way that people today view young people as naturals in understanding how to operate the newest smart phone. *Flight* magazine described the audience's reaction to the catapulting of a Virginia-class bomber into flight at the RAF Display in 1931: “Those spectators at Hendon who were not airminded (and alas! There are still a few hundred people in the country who are not) probably did not realise that anything very remarkable had taken place. Of course, the schoolboys who were at rehearsal were the

⁷⁰ *The Times*, May 16, 1928.

⁷¹ *Manchester Guardian*, May 31, 1928.

⁷² *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, May 17, 1928.

⁷³ Richards, *Imperialism and Music*, 240; *The Times*, June 25, 1936

⁷⁴ *The Times*, June 27, 1936.

proper sort of audience, for they can appreciate the finer points of flying.”⁷⁵ The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* suggested that the crowd at the main event in 1935 would “have a difficult task to equal the enthusiasm and “air-mindedness” shown by” the rehearsal’s “young visitors.”⁷⁶ While the success of Navy Week does not suggest a Royal Navy in *absolute* decline in terms of popularity, it is quite clear that the demographics of RAF and Royal Navy popularity were quite different. Even the Royal Navy had to admit that Navy Week did little to attract boys and few came on their own initiative.⁷⁷

Criticisms of the RAF Display went beyond the issue of its effects on children. Like the Navy Weeks and the military tattoos of the era, the RAF Displays triggered fears of creeping “militarism.” Critics often oscillated between rejecting the very idea of military spectacle and seeking to use them as anti-militarist propaganda to show “the reality” of warfare. In 1937, perhaps inspired by the gruesome bombing of Guernica less than two weeks earlier, Geoffrey Mander, a radical Liberal in the House of Commons and early opponent of appeasement, wanted Hendon to include a realistic display of terror bombing.⁷⁸ A scathing letter to the editor published in 1933 in the *Gloucestershire Echo* illustrates some of the criticisms leveled at the RAF Display. The letter expresses horror at the demonstration of “mimic bombing and fiery destruction of native villages as the tit-bit of the afternoon.” According to this writer, “the use of these weapons of war from the sky against totally unarmed and defenceless peoples” was “a monstrous crime.” The people of Britain, however,

⁷⁵ *Flight*, July 3, 1931, 634.

⁷⁶ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 29, 1935.

⁷⁷ “Report by Commanding Officer Boucher of *HMS Courageous*,” August 1936, ADM 179/63.

⁷⁸ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 09 May 1934 vol 289 cc1073-4.

felt more “furious indignation at the “alleged” torture of a few British prisoners in Moscow.”⁷⁹ It is not clear how much popular indignation existed concerning the torture of British prisoners, but the downplaying of the horrors of conditions in Moscow ties into how critiques of militarism often rise and fall alongside one's perception of foreign threats. Virtually everyone is fine with a thoroughly militarized society if the external threat is perceived as being existential. 1933 represents the high-water mark of criticism for the RAF Display from what can broadly be called “the left.” Things changed following the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the ensuing buildup of the *Luftwaffe*. Geoffrey Mander's critique stands as the exception that proves the rule. This critique comes after 1933, but he was also notably in the minority when it came to his view of appeasement. The more important point is not whether all criticisms of the RAF Display stopped after 1933, but whether 1933 represents a turning point in terms of public criticism.

The socialist *Daily Herald* clearly illustrates this abrupt shift. Its coverage initially oscillated between sarcastic disdain and righteous indignation only to settle on a sort of generic support after 1933. The newspaper's criticisms tended to fall into one of three separate, but not altogether unrelated, categories: one, the imperial critique, specifically the use of colonial policing or violence in the colonies; two, the belief in the dangers of an “arms race,” which was clearly perceived as one of the main causes of the First World War; and three, the social critique, which was rooted in a distrust of traditional elites and the belief in the victimization of an unfortunately gullible working class. After viewing the 1921 RAF Aerial Pageant, a correspondent for the *Daily Herald* provided a sarcastic promotion of the

⁷⁹ *Gloucestershire Echo*, June 16, 1933.

show. “If you would like to see just how the Royal Air Force demolishes a village – and it has frequently to be done in Mesopotamia and elsewhere where ignorant people refuse to recognise the benefits [sic] of 'civilised' rule by paying taxes – you can do so by going to Hendon to-day.” The Pageant exhibited “the true spirit of Empire” and the writer congratulated “the organisers of the show on their frankness.”⁸⁰ In 1922, the newspaper asserted, “The air scare is a war scare.”⁸¹ In 1924, the newspaper wondered if “the public really realise what terror future aerial warfare holds?” The newspaper's solution was the inclusion of a scene featuring the “bombing of non-combatants' houses” in order to produce a more realistic display.”⁸² The 1926 RAF Display was the “sinister sequel” to “the great war to “end war.”” Arnold Dawson, a correspondent for the newspaper, admitted that the spectacle at the 1927 Display “thrilled” him with admiration and “staggered” him with horror. It was more than just a spectacle, he was forced to admit, “behind it moves that stupid, malignant and criminal thing, the WAR MIND.”⁸³

In 1933, the *Daily Herald* reported sympathetically on protests against the RAF Display. Geoffrey Wilson, an ex-President of the Oxford Union, received glowing coverage. The newspaper endorsed his view that “The Government was using one of the fundamental instincts of the people for pageantry and colour, and society must be organised to prevent this kind of thing in the future.” “World governments,” Wilson argued, “were prostituting science in the cause of murder.”⁸⁴ This would be the last article critical of the RAF Display provided

⁸⁰ *Daily Herald*, July 2, 1921.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, June 26, 1922.

⁸² *Ibid*, July 2, 1924.

⁸³ *Ibid*, June 17, 1927.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, June 22, 1933.

in the newspaper. In reporting upon the treatment of “pacifist” demonstrators at the 1935 Display, the *Daily Herald* used up no space to editorialize or display sympathy.⁸⁵ A year later, the newspaper simply reported, “wet or fine, the Air Ministry promises a great display,” refraining from any criticism of the attendance of children at rehearsal.⁸⁶ After noting the progress of the RAF's expansion on display at Hendon in 1937, not a word of protest or cynicism was expressed concerning arms manufacturers.⁸⁷ Admittedly, this is one newspaper, but, as Robert Graves and Alan Hodge noted, the *Daily Herald* largely stood in for the “extreme Socialist faction” of the Labour Party.⁸⁸ As mentioned above, protesters still demonstrated at Hendon and many others certainly maintained their disapproval, quietly or not. Still, 1933 represents a public relations turning point for the RAF Display. The organizers of the Display did show some concern with public criticism before 1933, even caving in 1930 with their replacement of “tribesmen” with “pirates.” After 1933, however, the organizers could feel less constrained in their choices and less fearful of public backlash. The nonplussed reaction of Sir Philip Sassoon to criticisms in the House of Commons over the proposed bombing of “coloured people” at the RAF Display in 1936 indicated just such a change.⁸⁹ Depictions of colonial policing no longer provided the *raison d'être* of an independent RAF; instead, these exotic scenes could be used or avoided based on a careful cost-benefit analysis comparing their entertainment value to their tendency to stir up criticism. Organizers at Hendon from 1933 to 1937 primarily concerned themselves with

⁸⁵ Ibid, July 13, 1935.

⁸⁶ Ibid, June 27, 1936.

⁸⁷ Ibid, June 14, 1937.

⁸⁸ Graves and Hodge, *The Long Week-End*, 25.

⁸⁹ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 25 June 1936 vol 313 c1974W.

putting on an entertaining and popular show, but also one that informed the public about the RAF's understanding of aerial warfare.

“Wanton idiocy” and “Henry Dubbs:” RAF Messaging at Hendon

The *Daily Herald* provided a cross-sectional sketch of those in attendance at the RAF Display in 1926. Like the Aldershot Tattoo, the RAF Display represented one of the most glamorous events of the “London Season,” right alongside the Royal Ascot, the Henley Regatta, and the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament.⁹⁰ In fact, Hendon began to steal spectators from more traditional events like the Henley Regatta and the University Boat Race. “Perhaps,” the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* wondered, rowing seemed “a little tame” to people accustomed to the excitement at Hendon.⁹¹ The *Daily Herald* reported, “large and luxurious motor-cars, containing smartly-dressed women, drove to the aerodrome in one long, steady procession. It was a gala of fashion.” The *Daily Herald's* coverage here and elsewhere dripped with condescension and provided stereotypical critiques of bourgeois culture. The scene was fixed: a preening and status-obsessed middle-class, a naive working class gobbling up the spectacle, and a smattering of the elite just conspicuous enough to make the rest feel like they were part of a shared world. The large crowd, the newspaper suggested, “did not mean support for the new aerial competition in armaments; it merely spoke for the uses of advertisement and the traditional love of spectacle.”⁹² Just three years earlier, the *Daily Herald* dejectedly admitted: “To some minds the whole affair [the RAF Aerial Pageant] may appear extraordinarily stupid, but Henry Dubb evidently thought

⁹⁰ *The Times*, July 2, 1923.

⁹¹ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, April 30, 1931.

⁹² *Daily Herald*, July 5, 1926.

otherwise – he was there in thousands.” Henry Dubb was a popular cartoon character created by the American cartoonist Ryan Walker. In these cartoons, Henry Dubb represented the naive worker victimized by evil capitalists.⁹³ The exact socio-economic breakdown of those in attendance at Hendon is hard to piece together, but there is little to suggest it differed markedly from either the military tattoos or Navy Weeks of the era with the exception that the RAF Display probably tended to skew a little younger.⁹⁴

In their coverage of the 1926 RAF Display, the *Daily Herald* had gained some newfound hope that the Henry Dubbs of England would “determinedly bring their common sense to bear on the wanton idiocy of their ruling class;” otherwise, all of England would be “overwhelmed in the death of civilisation.”⁹⁵ The newspaper still worried, however, whether the public pieced together what they saw before them. The correspondent at the 1926 RAF Display observed one elderly gentleman “chortling mostly at the havoc which fifty of these [bombers] could make in any foreign town” and “thought of the similar mess enemy aeroplanes would make of the light-hearted summer crowd around, and wondered at the stupidity of a society bent on suicide.”⁹⁶ While the *Daily Herald* feared whether the crowd appreciated the great danger of air power, organizers of air displays and supporters of the RAF also feared what spectators would glean from the spectacle. Organizers and supporters of the RAF Display hoped the show would spread and deepen “air-mindedness,” but “air-

⁹³ Ibid, July 2, 1923.

⁹⁴ In Chapter 2, it was calculated that approximately 1/5 (20%) of those in attendance at the 1920 Aldershot Tattoo arrived via automobile. The equivalent figure for the Hendon Air Display in 1931 is 3/20 (15%). Statistics for the 1931 Hendon Display found in the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 29, 1931. Yearly attendance figures can be compared in the graph found in the Appendix.

⁹⁵ *Daily Herald*, July 5, 1926.

⁹⁶ Ibid, July 5, 1926.

mindfulness” still represented a means to an end. The ultimate goal remained translating public awareness into public support for government spending for an independent and fully funded RAF. The organizer of the first RAF Aerial Pageant in 1920, Sir John Salmond, believed that a strong showing could prove to the public that the RAF was a good investment.⁹⁷ After the 1923 Pageant, Air Minister Samuel Hoare claimed: “The show we have put up to-day could not have been carried out in any other country. [. . .] The public must have been very much impressed.”⁹⁸ This might have been true in 1923. Just five years after the First World War, few air forces in the world could compete with the RAF, however much its air fleet might have shrunk since the war.⁹⁹ Still, the RAF risked instilling so much confidence in the public as to undermine its claims for additional funding. As a result, spokesmen and supporters often made a point of bragging about the *quality* on display while lamenting the lack of *quantity*.¹⁰⁰ This tendency persisted into the late 1930s and it was rooted in more than just domestic concerns about funding. Sir Philip Sassoon, Under-Secretary of State for Air, defended Empire Air Day in 1935 by suggesting the air fleet on display “was not by any means large enough to make British Air Power a threat to any other Air Power.” In an eye-raising admission, Sassoon argued that what was on display was actually not impressive at all, but that it might be one day.¹⁰¹ At interwar air displays, the RAF had to thread the needle between establishing legitimacy as an infant service and putting on a provocative show that might instill excessive domestic confidence or provoke fears of

⁹⁷ *The Times*, July 5, 1920.

⁹⁸ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, July 2, 1923.

⁹⁹ Within two years of the armistice, the RAF had shrunk from a fleet of over 22,000 planes down to about 200. Barry Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 168.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, June 30, 1924.

¹⁰¹ Article written by Under-Secretary of State for Air, Sir Philip Sassoon, AIR 2/4449.

bellicosity at home and abroad.

While a few experts expressed doubts about Britain's aerial prowess on display at Hendon, most observers left the spectacle impressed by what they saw. This can be explained mostly by a lack of reference and the ever-improving capabilities of new aircraft. Most spectators knew little about the capabilities of foreign aircraft and the show typically emphasized some technological breakthrough, however small, each year. *Flight* magazine admitted that most attendees went to Hendon in “much the same way as they go to a circus.” The magazine went on to suggest, however, that “the Display would fail of much of its purpose if serious-minded citizens gleaned nothing more from it than amusement. There is ample evidence of rapidly spreading airmindedness in the nation.”¹⁰² *Flight* worried that informed observers took away different lessons than the average observer. The official doctrine of the RAF and the dominant strategic thinking of the time insisted upon the supremacy of the bomber. An Air Staff Paper produced in 1921 entitled “The Role of the Air Force in the System of Imperial Defence” laid out Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) Sir Hugh Trenchard's vision of an independent air force. “The primary function of the Air Force,” the paper declared, “would be the defence of the British Isles from invasion by air from the continent of Europe. This defence would largely take the form of a counter-offensive from the air, assisted by a ground organization coordinated by the Air Ministry.”¹⁰³ Another paper published by the Air Staff in 1921 entitled “Air Power and National Security” insisted that “in the offense lies the surest defence.”¹⁰⁴ Years before Stanley Baldwin uttered in 1932 his

¹⁰² *Flight*, June 28, 1928, 484.

¹⁰³ Philpott, *The Royal Air Force Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 1, Appendix G.

¹⁰⁴ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 71.

famous statement that “the bomber will always get through,” the inadequacy of air defense to counter bombers had become dogma in Trenchard's RAF. “The RAF War Manual,” published in July 1928, argued:

[T]he wide space of the air and the condition of cloud and wind confers unique powers of evasion on the attacking aircraft and renders their timely interception uncertain. [. . .] [T]he defenders cannot be said to possess absolute stopping powers, and cannot altogether prevent the attackers reaching their objective if the attack is made with sufficient determination.¹⁰⁵

This devotion to the bomber offensive persisted into the late 1930s and even into the Second World War as the Allies poured resources into a costly, and still controversial, strategic bombing campaign.

As Tami Davis Biddle has argued, “the history of strategic bombing in the twentieth century is a history of the tension between imagined possibilities and technical realities.”¹⁰⁶ Three factors account for the strength and persistence of this belief in the “knock out blow” from the air. The first was an increasingly widespread belief in the fragility of modern urban civilization. As Group Captain Arthur (later “Bomber”) Harris put it in a revised statement of the official war aim of the RAF in 1935, victory would go “to the nation which can sooner break down the other's power of resistance.” A “civilised community,” with its reliance upon urban centers and complex networks, would prove to be an incredibly vulnerable target.¹⁰⁷ The second was the push for institutional self-preservation. Bureaucracies, once established, seek expansion, or at the very least survival.¹⁰⁸ An insistence on the lethality and frugality of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 95.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 101.

¹⁰⁸ Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 160-161.

an independent strategic bombing force helped to ensure the RAF's survival and funding. The third can be described as the knowledge problem, which was exacerbated by factors one and two. Lessons that could have been learned about the limitations of bomber offensives in the First World War, the Spanish Civil War, or the Second Sino-Japanese War foundered in the face of cognitive bias or prejudicial blindness. Official postwar assessments of the bombing campaign against Germany in the First World War admitted that the material damage had been minimal, yet they insisted upon the “moral effect” of this campaign without offering any real evidence. This is not surprising. Recent studies have confirmed the ineffectiveness of the RAF's bombing campaign in the First World War. One study has argued that the cost of the bombing campaign for Germany amounted to “one-tenth of 1 percent of German war expenditure” and another has concluded that “the expense of the RAF's destroyed aircraft exceeded the cost of the damage it inflicted on Germany.”¹⁰⁹ Perhaps more understandably, the technological potential of air power remained hard to circumscribe in these years of rapid development. Sanguine assumptions of future technological progress (but progress *only in ways beneficial to the bomber*) allowed many advocates to overlook niggling technical issues over bombing accuracy, the threat of fighter aircraft, and navigation.¹¹⁰

Official doctrine made the bomber fleet the centerpiece of the RAF, but the actual composition of the RAF was slow to catch up to the strategic vision. The government approved an expansion scheme for the RAF according to the vision of Trenchard and the Air Staff in 1923. By 1928, 35 squadrons of a 52-squadron air force were bomber squadrons

¹⁰⁹ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 57-62.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 88.

against 17 fighter squadrons. In March 1921, the RAF had only 21 squadrons altogether.¹¹¹ The expansion programme represented a significant pledge of support during a time of retrenchment. In fact, while the RAF clearly would have liked more support throughout the interwar years, the period between 1924 and 1932 still saw RAF procurement expenditure increase.¹¹² Expansion proceeded slowly, however, as Trenchard and the RAF favored building up a foundation of strength rather than a “shopwindow” force of over-extended front-line squadrons. Only in 1928 did the RAF finally have more bombers than fighters and by 1934 the ratio still stood at only twelve fighter squadrons to fifteen bomber squadrons.¹¹³ The organizers of the RAF Displays at Hendon could only work with the air fleet on hand. This meant that despite claims that the Displays would educate the people about the nature of future aerial warfare, a yawning gap existed between the professed *raison d'être* of the RAF and the public enactment of its strengths and purpose.

In reporting on the 1928 RAF Display, *Flight* magazine suggested the show proved “so far as the Air Defence of Great Britain is concerned (and that constitutes the primary function of the Royal Air Force), a fighter is almost an anachronism.” An expert reading of the show, the magazine insisted, would lead to the conclusion that the fighter should, in fact, be “abolished.”¹¹⁴ An expert reading, indeed, because the demonstrations at Hendon hardly, on the face of things, revealed the unstoppable striking power of the bomber. The Display featured “an air battle for London, with single-engine fighters engaging huge bombing

¹¹¹ Philpott, *The Royal Air Force, An Encyclopaedia, Vol. 1*, 1

¹¹² Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 87.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 86. A “shop-window force” refers to one that appears strong on the surface, but lacks sufficient reserves.

¹¹⁴ *Flight*, June 28, 1928, 485.

aeroplanes.” Fighters repulsed the initial attack with “grim” losses on both sides, but a second wave of bombers managed to get through amidst further losses to drop their “payload.” The *Belfast News-Letter* suggested that if the battle had been real, “London and not only Hendon would be smouldering ruins and half the population dead and the other half gasping for life because of the effects of the gas bombs.”¹¹⁵ Considering the payload of these bombers could not have been more than what had already been endured during the Great War, such a reaction seems unmoored to reality. Other standout features of the Display to observers were the “technical skill revealed by many of the pilots in formation flying and aerobatics” and the demonstration of a strafing run by fighter planes on a column of lorries.¹¹⁶ Organizers hardly presented the fighter here as an anachronism; instead, the fighter formed the backbone of the spectacle. This troubling message was not lost upon some educated RAF observers. Air Officer Robert Brooke-Popham thought the display would be misleading to less thoughtful onlookers. Bombers, Brooke-Popham argued, were actually much more difficult to bring down than the Display suggested. The real defense of London on display consisted not of the fighters and anti-air guns, but the “offensive-defensive weapon” the bombers represented.¹¹⁷ The 1928 RAF Display suggests two obstacles confronting organizers in their efforts to provide an educational show for the public: one, material constraints, or the gap between the ambitions of RAF official doctrine and the actual capabilities of the air fleet in existence; two, the difficulties of demonstrating a successful strategic bombing mission without simultaneously deprecating the efficacy of RAF air defences or seeming bellicose. A

¹¹⁵ *Belfast News-Letter*, June 20, 1928.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, July 2, 1928; *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, July 2, 1928.

¹¹⁷ *The Times*, June 29, 1928.

simulated attack on Paris or Berlin, for example, would have solved the former but not the latter. As a result, until the mid-1930s, the RAF Displays delivered a muddled message concerning the potency of aerial bombing and one out of step with official RAF doctrine.

The British government abided an armaments “truce” from November 1931 to March 1933 while the disarmament talks carried on in Geneva.¹¹⁸ This meant the production of bombers, which were targeted for elimination at Geneva, came to a standstill. The Geneva talks raised tensions between the services to a fever pitch. The Admiralty advocated the abolition of bombers, while the War Office supported the abolition of bombers, submarines, and heavy guns. In the end, the Geneva talks failed, with the enforceability of the bomber's abolition being a primary stumbling block. The participants could not work out a way to ensure that civilian aircraft would not be converted into bombers. The abolition of the bomber appeared (perhaps it was) unenforceable. The divisions among the participants at Geneva ran deeper than this issue or even eventual Nazi non-cooperation. Hitler's decision to pull out of Geneva should be considered, in all likelihood, a contributory rather than a sufficient cause for the failure of these talks to produce anything of substance.¹¹⁹ In any case, the composition of the air fleet after the armaments “truce” looked far different from the one the Air Staff hoped for in 1923. Starting in 1934, the RAF began an expansion program that transformed the air fleet and, as a result, the RAF Display.

Rearmament and the Transformation of RAF Displays.

¹¹⁸ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 103.

¹¹⁹ Philpott, *The Royal Air Force 1930 to 1939, An Encyclopaedia of the Inter-War Years, Vol. 2, Rearmament 1930 to 1939* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2008), 11-12.

In 1933, the government allocated £16.7 million to the RAF. Over the following three years, funding went up each year, reaching £50.1 million in 1936.¹²⁰ The frontline strength of the RAF increased from 890 aircraft in 1934 to 1,170 in 1935 and 1,310 in 1936.¹²¹ Much of this growth took place in the bomber fleet. The Air Ministry was finally getting the Air Force it had wanted for so long. Rearmament continued along the lines the Air Staff broadly envisioned until the cabinet approved the recommendations of Thomas Inskip's Report as Minister for the Co-Ordination of Defence in December 1937.¹²² As late as 1936, Neville Chamberlain (then Chancellor of the Exchequer) argued "that the RAF with a powerful striking capacity offered the greatest security for the amount available to spend."¹²³ The Inskip Report, however, finally brought a critical eye to RAF assumptions in the light of changed circumstances. Inskip's committee considered the implications of radar, for example, and the growing capabilities of fighters. These considerations and others led to a reassessment of the roles of bombers and fighters in a coming war. Inskip's Report envisioned another long war of resources rather than the war of the "knock-out blow." In this war, fighters would play a pivotal role in sustaining a defense of Great Britain while superior financial, naval, and, yes, even aerial bombing forces could be mustered to eventually defeat the Axis threat.¹²⁴ The Inskip Report did not, however, convince most in the Air Ministry. The Air Staff circulated a memorandum in November 1938 insisting on the continued belief in the counteroffensive bombing campaign.¹²⁵ The belief in the power of the bomber remained

¹²⁰ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 286.

¹²¹ Philpott, *The Royal Air Force 1930 to 1939, An Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 2, 390.

¹²² Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 121.

¹²³ Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties*, 78-79.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 170-173

¹²⁵ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 123

firmly entrenched. As Tami Davis Biddle has argued, the problems faced by the RAF in the early stages of the war had less to do with funding and more to do with an unwillingness to thoroughly analyze the requirements of its own strategy centered on the strategic bomber offensive. The progress made in air defense during this period happened in spite of the RAF's focus being elsewhere.¹²⁶ The last two crucial years before the start of the war witnessed the introduction of a radar-based defense system and the next generation of high-speed monoplane fighters, including the Spitfire and the Hurricane: the great chariots of “the few” and symbols of the Battle of Britain.

Observers of the RAF Display consistently inferred from the show lessons at odds with reality. The 1934 Display began a transitional period for the RAF after the failure of the Geneva talks, the emergence of the German threat, and the beginning of rearmament. The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* noted “the increase in the use of large formations” and the importance of the show in a year in which the strength of the RAF was “so seriously questioned.” The newspaper also made a curious assertion that “military aviation in this country has, ever since the war, made the improvement of fighters its chief consideration. And fighters are, of necessity, a weapon of defence alone. Few people can any longer maintain that the weakness of our fighting forces will be accepted by other nations as a plea for peace.”¹²⁷ It is true that British military aviation had made steady progress in the production of newer and more effective fighters, but this had never been the RAF's “chief consideration.” The fighter ended up being the Cinderella of the RAF: the neglected

¹²⁶ Ibid, 88.

¹²⁷ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 30, 1934.

stepsister during the interwar period, it would steal the show at the ball, so to speak. The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer's* assertion displays a lack of understanding of government priorities, but it is actually an understandable assessment of the product on display at Hendon over the years. Bombers flew in formation and bombed fake towns or ports, but the fighters made the RAF Display tick.

The RAF Displays exhibited with great fanfare the newest developments in aviation and, given the rapid advancements made in aviation during this period, they benefited from being able to offer seemingly different experiences each year. *The Times* suggested that the 1933 RAF Display showed an RAF leading the world in military aviation.¹²⁸ Almost all seemed to agree that the 1936 show demonstrated a technologically advanced Air Force of which all Britons could be proud. Indeed, *The Times* even professed an embarrassment of riches, reminding those Britons able to see the aircraft at the displays that “they could count themselves fortunate shareholders in a concern whose products are unequalled [sic] in any other part of the world.”¹²⁹ The Minister for the Coordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip, even used the perceived quality of the aircraft on display at Hendon to insist that Winston Churchill's call for an earlier start to full-scale rearmament would have only saddled the RAF with obsolete aircraft. This argument provoked laughter in the Commons, with Churchill quipping that the logical conclusion of such an argument would be to wait another two years to rearm and have an even more up-to-date Air Force.¹³⁰

The near uniformity of opinion about the impressiveness of the RAF is ironic,

¹²⁸ *The Times*, June 27, 1933.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, June 27, 1936.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, July 21, 1936.

because looking back it is clear that it was not the undisputed leader in aviation that many thought it was. Even the Fleet Air Arm, which was absolutely of an inferior standard in comparison to the naval air arms of Japan and the United States, received high praise from observers when it made an appearance at the Silver Jubilee Naval Review in 1935.¹³¹ The gap between perception and reality can possibly be explained by ignorance brought about by British insularity, but it might also have something to do with the very nature of aircraft on display. As I have shown, aircraft at military and naval displays often stole the show. Aircraft, regardless of their merits relative to other aircraft, still induced awe.

Perceptions of British aerial strength at displays shifted, however, with the rise of the *Luftwaffe*. The British struggled to properly assess German aerial might. Hitler's declaration of the *Luftwaffe*'s parity with the RAF in March 1935 shocked the cabinet and estimates of the German threat became more and more gloomy over the next few years.¹³² Chamberlain's fear of the *Luftwaffe* delivering a disastrous “bolt from the blue” undoubtedly played a large role in his decision to appease Hitler at Munich in 1938. The Air Staff estimated at the time that the *Luftwaffe* could drop 150 tons of bombs per day on British soil, causing tens of thousands of casualties per day for an indefinite period. In reality, of course, the *Luftwaffe* was incapable of such a campaign in 1938 and fears of a “bolt from the blue” were in many ways a case of national projection. Still, Germany had outdeterred Britain.¹³³ After witnessing the display of German air power over Vienna in 1938 and examining the aircraft set to be

¹³¹ Till, *Air Power and the Royal Navy*, 97; *The Times*, July 17, 1935.

¹³² Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 126

¹³³ *Ibid*, 109.

displayed during Empire Air Day in the coming summer, MP Oliver Simmonds predicted that the world would finally realize just how weak the British actually were.¹³⁴ Much had changed in two years, but most historians argue that the quality of British aircraft had actually *improved* from 1936-1938 in relation to those of the *Luftwaffe*.¹³⁵ All of this points to a separation of perception from reality that plagued interwar thinking about air power from the highest ranks of government down to the average spectator at Hendon.¹³⁶

By 1933, some in government and even in the RAF began to question the necessity of the RAF Display. The government placed considerable pressure on the Air Ministry to justify the Display's expense in 1933.¹³⁷ Under-Secretary for the Air Ministry Sir Philip Sassoon managed to convince the government that the Display simply showed off “a collective culmination of the annual training programme.”¹³⁸ This was always a half-truth at best and it became an increasingly absurd defense over time. Arguing for the practical training value of the RAF Display in 1933 is akin to arguing for the training value of Major League Baseball's Home Run Derby. Nevertheless, Air Ministry records indicate that the RAF itself gave serious consideration the following year to abandoning the RAF Display.¹³⁹ Although higher overall attendance totals would be recorded at the 1936 and 1937 displays, attendance had previously peaked in 1931.¹⁴⁰ The Display had, indeed, lost a bit of its novelty by this point. Ian Philpott has suggested that “by 1935 the display had settled down to a well-rehearsed

¹³⁴ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 15 March 1938 vol 333, 341.

¹³⁵ Smith, *British Air Strategy between the Wars*, 222-225.

¹³⁶ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 126.

¹³⁷ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Deb 28 June 1933 vol 279 cc1474-5.

¹³⁸ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, January 21, 1938.

¹³⁹ AIR 2/4442.

¹⁴⁰ *The Times*, July 1, 1935.

spectacular, if somewhat routine, performance. To report the event would be to repeat reports of previous years.”¹⁴¹ This downplays the evolution of the RAF Display in the 1920s and early 1930s. A changing political environment, adaptations to consumer demands, and an evolving RAF helped give shape to the Display over this period. The program at Hendon had become increasingly predictable, but by then the rapid expansion of the RAF helped transform and revive aerial displays there and elsewhere, revealing an almost insatiable public's desire to get a closer look at its air force.

The King's Silver Jubilee Reviews of the RAF at Mildenhall and Duxford in 1935 and the Coronation Mass Flight at the RAF Display in 1937 illustrate the rapid changes in aerial displays consequent on the RAF's expansion and the looming threat of war. King George V inspected 350 airplanes on the ground at Mildenhall and then received an airborne salute from a flight of about 250 airplanes at Duxford. The Reviews, according to the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, had shown “in a way that was impossible by any other means, that its [the RAF's] organisation and flying discipline are without superior. It is clear that the expansion programme which has been undertaken enjoys an exceptionally favourable starting point.” The mass formation flight did not possess the “theatricalism” of the RAF Display nor was it as “startling” as similar flights in Russia or the United States.¹⁴² These descriptions belie a sense of optimism or at least demonstrate an attempt to look at the bright side. If one reads between the lines, the newspaper is admitting that this was not a particularly large mass formation and it consisted of already largely obsolete aircraft. Ian Philpott has described the

¹⁴¹ Philpott, *The Royal Air Force 1930-1939, An Encyclopaedia, Vol. 2, 55.*

¹⁴² *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, July 8, 1935.

Silver Jubilee Review in 1935 as a “stately procession,” with Heyford bombers lumbering overhead at 98 mph and the Hart fighters accompanying them floating through the air at 115 mph.¹⁴³ The Silver Jubilee Review in 1935, however unimpressive a start it might have been, still represents the RAF's shift to a focus on mass formation flying in its public displays in the last few years before the war.

The 1937 RAF Display also served as a Coronation Review for King George VI. By almost all accounts, this last Display was the finest of them all. A flight of 250 aircraft flew past and towards Hyde Park, while another 250 aircraft remained to provide the traditional program, including a set piece featuring the defense and destruction of a seaport.¹⁴⁴ The sheer “mass” involved in the Display impressed observers. This included not only the number of aircraft involved, but also the number of spectators. Over 200,000 attended the 1937 Hendon Air Display, the most of any in its eighteen year run. The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* reported that the public was most impressed by the mass flight: “The effects of mass were never more in evidence than when the formation of 260 aeroplanes passed over the aerodrome shortly after the King and Queen. That formation was an indication and a portent.”¹⁴⁵ *The Times* talked about the “impression of mass” provided by the Display and reported that the mass formation flight and the set piece “were both successes of the kind which silence even so big a crowd by their magnitude and intensity and by their significance of the grim things that belong to modern warfare.”¹⁴⁶ The *Gloucestershire Echo* tried to

¹⁴³ Philpott, *The Royal Air Force 1930-1939, An Encyclopaedia, Vol. 2*, 57.

¹⁴⁴ *Bucks Herald*, June 18, 1937; *Nottingham Journal*, June 26, 1937.

¹⁴⁵ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 28, 1937.

¹⁴⁶ *The Times*, June 18, 1937, June 28, 1937.

interpret the impressions made by the massive bomber formation's fly-over in a tortured passage that deserves to be quoted at length:

The pageant may convey to imaginative people some idea of the horrors of aerial warfare, but it served to illustrate and to emphasize the need for power to meet possible attacks from abroad. The big Coronation flight of 260 machines in mass formation not only typified the improved strength of the British air arm: no other set-piece could have impressed upon the vast array of spectators more powerfully the menace of air attack in a future war, should such happen. [. . .] they came away convinced that we are getting value for the money [. . . and] building up an Air Force that no other nation will challenge light-heartedly. It is the best security for our peace.¹⁴⁷

This explanation, while trying to tame the minds of “imaginative people,” actually does nothing to address the “horrors of aerial warfare” that such massive bomber formations did in fact represent. In no way could the massive bomber formation “meet possible attacks” in any other way than bombing the enemy's population in the same manner. Furthermore, knowing this, the “menace” posed by the sight of a massive bomber formation might make you proud of your own side's air force, but it would also reinforce fears of what would happen when the formation overhead was not carrying the insignia of your own country. In the end, the RAF Display seemed to unintentionally stumble upon the perfect formula for a display of military power in a democracy. The massive bomber formation avoided explicit acts of violence, and thus the charge of militarism, while eliciting pride from onlookers through its impressive show of strength. This strength, so chilling and formidable in its potential, in turn could only fortify the conviction that such a bomber fleet was needed as a deterrent.

The RAF finally possessed a bomber fleet capable of putting on shows consistent with official RAF doctrine. The irony, of course, is that 1937 also saw the first significant

¹⁴⁷ *Gloucestershire Echo*, June 28, 1937.

shift away from a full commitment to the counter-offensive theory of air defense as a result of the Inskip Report. At exactly the same time as the fighter and the dogfight were reentering strategic considerations in a serious way, both began fading into the background at aerial displays compared to the bomber. Tami Davis Biddle argues that various factors led to RAF “declaratory policy” far outstripping “its actual abilities.”¹⁴⁸ A similar phenomenon occurred at the aerial displays of the era. The content of the RAF Displays often stood in stark contrast to the “declaratory policy” of the RAF. As a result, the aerial displays at Hendon and elsewhere can only be seen as one more contributing factor to the general gap between the rhetoric of airpower and the reality that awaited the British people at the outset of the war. Like the soldiers at Aldershot and the ships at Navy Week or fleet reviews, the airplane possessed symbolic baggage that constrained the ability of RAF propagandists to use it as a tool to manipulate public opinion. The difference between the three primary “actors” in these spectacles is that while the soldier and the ship brought to mind the limitations of history, the airplane suggested the limitless future. Some feared this limitless future, others welcomed it, and perhaps most viewed it with ambivalence. Thinking about the future, however, is the stuff of defense planning and air power undeniably established a greater associative relationship with the future than its naval and army counterparts during this era.

The 1937 RAF Display featured newer, more advanced aircraft than those seen at the Silver Jubilee Review in 1935. The mass formation flight still included older types, but the set piece featured the new Bristol Blenheim bomber and other events featured the Hawker

¹⁴⁸ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 69.

Fury fighter. The Blenheim shrieked into the arena at a top speed of nearly 300 mph and the Hawker Fury reached speeds of up to 240 mph.¹⁴⁹ Here was a portent of the end of the RAF Display at Hendon. Its aerodrome had expanded to accommodate the ever-larger crowds, but the aircraft themselves were outgrowing the confines. Fast monoplanes simply could not perform the close-quarter aerobatics of the older biplanes and these maneuvers could no longer be justified as demonstrations of training.¹⁵⁰ The increasingly crowded borough made the Display even more of a safety hazard. Crash landing in a nearby empty field is far more acceptable than crashing into a row of new homes.¹⁵¹ In addition, the RAF's emphasis began moving from instilling enthusiasm in the public to raising awareness of its expansion program. The funds were flowing in so rapidly that manufacturing capacity could no longer keep up with the demand for new aircraft.¹⁵²

The Development of Empire Air Day and the Stubborn Appeal of the Fighter

This shift in purpose by the RAF partially explains its transition to Empire Air Day as a replacement for the RAF Display. The Air Ministry and the Air League of the British Empire collaborated in developing Empire Air Day in order to publicize the RAF and emphasize aviation's importance in strengthening the bonds of empire. Organizers used Navy

¹⁴⁹ *Western Daily Press*, June 21, 1937; *Nottingham Journal*, June 26, 1937. Note here that the bomber is still faster than the fighter. One of the reasons so many believed that bombers remained unstoppable throughout the interwar period was that fighters generally did not become faster than bombers until right before the start of the Second World War.

¹⁵⁰ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, January 21, 1938.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, July 2, 1934. The most notable accident at Hendon occurred at the 1934 Display. A Hawker Hart bomber flying in formation experienced a mechanical failure while saluting the Royal Box. Managing to swerve away to avoid taking out royalty, the bomber still crashed in plain view of the audience. The pilot would survive, but the observer, Squadron Leader Stanley Collett, son of the Lord Mayor of London, perished in the crash. The show would go on, but the tragedy illustrates the *frisson* of excitement that only RAF pageantry could create.

¹⁵² Philpott, *The Royal Air Force 1930-1939, An Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 2, 235.

Week as a model for Empire Air Day. During the interwar period, each service seemed to react to, and learn from, the displays of the other branches. Navy Week, after all, emerged in response to the popularity of the Hendon Display and the Aldershot Tattoo. An RAF poster in 1935 announced, “Empire Air Day is your opportunity of seeing behind the scenes of aviation. On this day over a hundred aerodromes throughout the country invite you [. . . to witness . . .] varied and interesting displays [including] mock battles in the air, bombing, [and] firing on targets.”¹⁵³ *The Air Review* hoped that, unlike the RAF Display, Empire Air Days would normalize the airplane and remove its exoticism by providing the British people with an opportunity to see airplanes and airmen up close.¹⁵⁴ Between 120,000-150,000 people attended Empire Air Day at all participating airfields the first year.¹⁵⁵ This can hardly be considered a failure, but the RAF quickly went to work to systematically think through what it wanted from Empire Air Day as a public spectacle. Starting in 1935, the Air Ministry required each RAF Station participating in Empire Air Day to file a report that analyzed what “worked” at that year's event. Each report also included a set of recommendations “with a view to improving it wherever possible.”¹⁵⁶ The internal debates centered on whether Empire Air Day should be more like an open shop (i.e. Navy Week) or more like a display (i.e. the RAF Display). The battle lines were drawn between those desiring greater publicity and

¹⁵³ “Empire Air Day Poster,” AIR 2/4449.

¹⁵⁴ *Air Review*, May 1934, 19. Bernhard Rieger notes a general push by aviation enthusiasts in Britain and Germany to make flight seem safe and banal. Much of this was part of an effort to encourage air travel. One can sense this tendency towards normalizing flight in the RAF as well, but this was perhaps only because the “fire and brimstone” approach had already done its work. See Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 154-155.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, February 1936, 13.

¹⁵⁶ “Memorandum from Air Ministry, DSD W.S. Douglas,” AIR 2/4442.

those more concerned with the event getting in the way of the RAF's expansion program. The Air League, the RAF's partner in putting on the event, typically advocated for more openness and for more spectacular shows while the RAF often pushed back in the name of secrecy or the exigencies of training.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, *The Air Review* worried that Empire Air Day would suffer due to the RAF's lack of attention during a time of institutional transformation.¹⁵⁸ They need not have worried. The RAF devoted considerable attention to the event considering how much was on its plate at the time. Subsequent Empire Air Days drew even more people. More than twice as many attended the 1936 Empire Air Day than the first in 1934.¹⁵⁹ By 1937, the combined attendance (nearly half a million people) at the participating airfields on Empire Air Day doubled the number of those attending the RAF Display at Hendon in the same year.¹⁶⁰

If not as spectacular as Hendon, Empire Air Days proved to be more effective at exposing the British public to the RAF. As the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* put it:

That display [Hendon] was, at its best, somewhat too regional. It could not fulfill adequately the function of familiarising the larger public with the flying Service and of telling the taxpayers of Great Britain what they were getting in the shape of air defence in return for their money. Empire Air Day is much better fitted to this task, for it is observed not in a single area, but at stations dotted all over the country.¹⁶¹

As was the case at Hendon, which benefited from the extension to Hendon of the Northern Line of the Tube in 1923/1924, the success of Empire Air Days speaks to the growing interconnectedness of interwar Britain and to the ability of millions to pay for

¹⁵⁷ AIR 2/4449.

¹⁵⁸ *The Air Review*, February 1936, 13.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, June 1936, 12.

¹⁶⁰ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, January 21, 1938.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*.

entertainment.¹⁶² As Robert Graves and Alan Hodge pointed out, “London expanded outwards rather than upwards. [. . .] Huge housing estates were developed, and new 'dormitory suburbs' created by the extension of the Underground and Metropolitan railway systems.”¹⁶³ Richard Overy has described what must have been the average spectator at an event like Empire Air Day and the RAF Display: “For the employed householder in the new suburban housing of the 1930s, able to buy a small car and a radio and go on holiday each year, the discourse on capitalism in crisis made little sense. [. . .] The ethos was one of capitalism in crisis, the prevailing reality one of consumer revival.”¹⁶⁴ This does not mean that the despair of life on the Tyne or in Manchester for the down and out was not acute, but it does point to an interesting, and not unrelated, parallel concerning the gap between perception and reality during this period. As Robert Shay has noted, “the rest of the world was not so fortunate as Britain in its economic efforts to shake off the depression.”¹⁶⁵ In the same way that the language of “capitalism in crisis” became widespread and in some measure at odds with the data, the same can be said for the relationship between air power and its capabilities.¹⁶⁶ Other scholars have noted the “right-wing” nature of air power enthusiasm, but the intellectual connection between “anti-capitalism” and air power enthusiasm is actually far more important. In any case, the success of Empire Air Day, which saw hundreds of thousands

¹⁶² Colindale Station, completed in 1924, set the record for most passengers arriving in a single day the day of the Hendon Air Display in 1931. *The Times*, July 1, 1931.

¹⁶³ Graves and Hodge, *The Long Week-End*, 161.

¹⁶⁴ Overy, *The Twilight Years*, 91.

¹⁶⁵ Robert Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties*, 16. Shay argues that since the recovery came from an increase in domestic consumption rather than trade, observers were slow to recognize the recovery at all. Shay also oddly suggests that what the British government actually chose to do could not have worked, which reveals Shay's deep faith in Keynesian orthodoxy.

¹⁶⁶ Overy, *The Twilight Years*, 1.

make their way to airfields throughout the country, speaks to a high elasticity of demand. The supply in this case being RAF military spectacle and the demand being a country increasingly able to sustain so many military displays in such numbers due to a growing middle-class and a more efficient transportation network. Even the Air Ministry recognized that by 1938 Empire Air Day was an increasingly good option since public transportation had improved so much in recent years.¹⁶⁷

The military displays of the era appealed to more than just the middle classes, although the demographics of audiences are hard to establish. Empire Air Day undoubtedly acquainted new groups of people with air power. In 1937, *The Times*, for example, highlighted a rustic farmer examining an airplane up close for the first time in his life.¹⁶⁸ The organizers of Empire Air Day made a concerted effort to reach every corner of Britain and confront each Briton with the existence of air power. J.A. Chamier, the Secretary of the Air League, wanted to make admission free so that all classes could mingle together.¹⁶⁹ In the end, adults had to pay one shilling and children were admitted for threepence; hardly a barrier to entry.¹⁷⁰ In an Air Ministry report in 1937, Air Vice Marshal Sir Ernest Leslie Gossage recommended the “staging of mass flights periodically over important industrial areas” in conjunction with Empire Air Day.¹⁷¹ Empire Air Day in 1938 and 1939 both featured the kind of mass formation flying that Air Vice Marshal Gossage had in mind. In the days leading up to Empire Air Day in 1938, aircraft flew “over 170 cities and towns using ten

¹⁶⁷ “Air Ministry Communique N0. 5385,” AIR 2/4444, NA.

¹⁶⁸ *The Times*, May 31, 1937.

¹⁶⁹ AIR 2/4435.

¹⁷⁰ *The Brechin Advertiser*, May 2, 1939.

¹⁷¹ AIR 2/4444.

routes twice daily so that the largest number of people could see them.”¹⁷² In 1939, the RAF again engaged in “mass flights of Royal Air Force aircraft over every important town in the country,” many of these flights consisting of new Blenheims, Spitfires, and Hurricanes.¹⁷³ The RAF no longer needed to draw people in and make them “airminded;” instead, aircraft could now blanket the British skies with an ever-growing aerial fleet, reaching each individual Briton – whether they lived in Pembroke or Essex, Ulster or Bircham Newton.

The Air Ministry gave each station commander “a free hand” to make “such organisations and arrangements as are best suited to their command” for Empire Air Day.¹⁷⁴ As was the case with the Commanders of the Home Ports for Navy Week, most of the station commanders in the RAF quickly took to the role of stage manager and became keenly interested in putting on a popular show. The Air Ministry leadership initially seemed more concerned with not letting anything get in the way of training, but Empire Air Day nevertheless evolved in response to consumer demand. The RAF still cared about putting on a good show. Perception of consumer demand is found in the station reports filed with the Air Ministry. Those who wrote the reports canvassed spectators at the aerodrome in order to assess public perception. These reports represent the most systematic attempts at assessing public perception of aerial displays in the interwar period.¹⁷⁵ Many reports expressed concerns that the flying at Empire Air Days would inevitably be less impressive than that on display at Hendon. It was widely understood that “unless an extensive flying programme”

¹⁷² Philpott, *The Royal Air Force 1930-1939, An Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 2, 82.

¹⁷³ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, May 3, 1939.

¹⁷⁴ AIR 2/4449.

¹⁷⁵ “Report, RAF Station, Henlow Camp, 1935,” AIR 2/4449.

was arranged, “the interest of the public cannot be maintained.”¹⁷⁶ Another station commander insisted “a set piece should be included in the Display,” since the public were “naturally interested in a strange building or structure on the aerodrome” being destroyed.¹⁷⁷ Once more, officers in the RAF feared what audience members would infer from the flying on display. The report filed by Waddington Aerodrome in 1935 reveals these fears: “It is thought generally speaking people come to see flying, and that they are not able to discriminate between the training and spectacular aspects of what they see.” Obsolete fighters like the Avro 504 and straight-flying bombers, the report went on, were bound to have an “adverse effect [. . .] on the minds of the public. [. . .] It is considered that flights of fighters should be lent to heavy bomber squadrons, so that a more varied programme can be arranged.”¹⁷⁸ The report produced by Aldergrove Station in Ulster agreed: “The public, although extremely interested in the work of the R.A.F., were not so much interested in the flying done in these large bombing machines. It is most difficult to produce any spectacular flying of any kind.”¹⁷⁹ Without the “mass effect” that could be produced by a bomber fleet brought together all at once at a place like Hendon, bombers typically failed to entertain in the same way as fighters. Newer, faster aircraft, as Director of Staff Duties Sholto Douglass noted, also made close formation flying more difficult and dangerous.¹⁸⁰ Technological improvements often made for a worse show; entertainment and fighting efficiency did not advance in lockstep. Even today, air shows feature biplanes because they can perform

¹⁷⁶ “Report, RAF Station, Mount Batten, 1935,” AIR 2/4449.

¹⁷⁷ “Report, RAF Station, Bircham Newton, 1935,” AIR 2/4449.

¹⁷⁸ “Report, RAF Station, Waddington, 1935,” AIR 2/4449.

¹⁷⁹ “Report, RAF Station, Aldergrove, 1935,” AIR 2/4449.

¹⁸⁰ AIR 2/4444.

aerobatics that thrill crowds just as much as supersonic jets. The RAF Station at North Weald recommended in its report “that individual stations should not be encouraged to stage events of a too spectacular nature or make abnormal displays with aircraft.” The inevitably underwhelming product would leave the public “disappointed and discouraged.”¹⁸¹ The gap between the reality of the RAF's actual Air Force and the one on display in its propaganda grew rapidly in the late 1930s.

Despite these official fears, varied programs, including aerobatics, formation flying, and dramatic set pieces, carried on at Empire Air Day. No single airfield could match the spectacle experienced at the RAF Displays at Hendon, but Empire Air Day exposed millions more people to some of the basic elements that made Hendon such an interwar phenomenon. What is ironic, once more, is how a mixture of technical necessity and consumer demand bent the displays at Empire Air Day away from official RAF strategic doctrine. The organizers of military propaganda faced obstacles in their mission to manipulate public opinion. In regards to British naval propaganda in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jan Rüger notes: “the ways in which spectators behaved stood in contrast to or even openly contradicted official intentions. Any strategy of “bread and circuses” had to contend with important obstacles imposed by “the masses” themselves.”¹⁸² “The masses” remained plural rather than singular, diverse rather than uniform. Both too ignorant and too wise all at once, the people could be influenced but not controlled. The RAF, of course, confronted this same problem. The control of the content of RAF propaganda posed almost as much of a problem

¹⁸¹ “Report, RAF Station, North Weald, 1935,” AIR 2/4449.

¹⁸² Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 105.

as the control of its reception. The Official Programme for the 1938 Empire Air Day emphasized “the wider aspects of the strategy of aerial defence” and the “modern theory of active defence.”¹⁸³ The Programme asked spectators not to consider the fighters on hand as representing the actual “first-line” of the country's defense. The bomber, in the form of a deterrent and counter-offensive force, more accurately served this role. While the consuming public and local RAF station commanders alike called for a more prominent role for fighters in their aerial displays, the Air Staff still insisted upon their subordinate position in the official literature. The station reports seem to suggest that the public more likely believed in what they saw rather than what they read in the Official Programme, if they read it at all.

Ian Smith Watson has argued that the RAF aerial displays of the interwar period helped the independent air arm survive, which therefore helped prepare the British people for the Battle of Britain.¹⁸⁴ One of the main arguments of Tami Davis Biddle, however, centers on how the aggressive push for an independent air arm, which bled into the aerial displays of the period, helped make the RAF unprepared for the Second World War or, at the very most, prepared in spite of itself.¹⁸⁵ The aerial displays helped the British people prepare for the Battle of Britain, but mainly by way of the imagination. The spectacles at Hendon and Empire Air Day helped lay some of the groundwork for the “myth” of the Battle of Britain and established a popular framework for viewing military aviation throughout the Second World War. The attack on Taranto reminded the Air Correspondent for the *Yorkshire Post and*

¹⁸³ “1938. EAD Programme Arrangements,” AIR 2/4445.

¹⁸⁴ Ian Smith Watson, *RAF at Home: The History of the RAF Air Displays from 1920* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010), 10.

¹⁸⁵ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 176.

Leeds Intelligencer of “a mock attack on a ground target by converging dive-bombing by deck-flying aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm” at Hendon.¹⁸⁶ A pilot involved in the D-Day invasion likewise observed that there were so many aircraft flying over the beaches that “it was like a Hendon air display.”¹⁸⁷ In 1940, a cameraman described the dive-bombing at Dunkirk as a “fantastic picture of the Hendon air pageant gone mad.”¹⁸⁸ A fighter pilot involved in a maelstrom of aerial combat over the coastal towns of France reported that the scene “absolutely beggared Hendon air pageant.”¹⁸⁹ The best compliment the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* could provide for a squadron of Spitfires that had seen combat in Norway and at Dunkirk was that they flew so low and in such close formation that onlookers felt they were at Hendon once more.¹⁹⁰ Hendon became a lens through which many Britons viewed the actual combat of the Second World War. Despite far more resources being poured into the Strategic Bombing Offensive, Fighter Command has remained at the forefront of the imagination. This aspect of British public memory has been addressed most squarely by the works of Malcolm Smith and Angus Calder. British culture, according to Smith, has “preferred to concentrate on the individualistic fighter pilots rather than the morally questionable strategy of bombing.”¹⁹¹ The roots of this vision of public memory, however, precede the war and can be found at places like Hendon and the many aerodromes that participated in Empire Air Day. Of course these roots go deeper. The glorification of the

¹⁸⁶ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, November 15, 1940.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, June 6, 1944.

¹⁸⁸ *The Daily Mirror*, June 10, 1940.

¹⁸⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, June 10, 1940.

¹⁹⁰ *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, August 5, 1940.

¹⁹¹ Smith, *Britain and 1940*, 21.

fighter pilot, those “knights of the air,” emerged during the First World War.¹⁹² The aerial displays cannot take credit for its origin, but they helped to preserve this image or “myth” at least as much as they helped preserve the RAF's autonomy.

The RAF Display and Empire Air Day undoubtedly contributed in some measure to the RAF's ability to perform operations on a large scale. *The Times* argued that the 1937 Coronation Display at Hendon represented a landmark for a growing RAF. The RAF had delivered a formation of bombers able to demonstrate the “moral effect” of a massive formation; a phenomenon heretofore only discussed and extolled by the Air Staff rather than realized.¹⁹³ Aviation experts at the time often noted that the RAF Display provided the most realistic look at aerial warfare one could find. One expert interviewed by the *Daily Herald* suggested that Hendon was “the finest practice for the real thing we can possibly get.”¹⁹⁴ The RAF did participate in Annual Air Exercises during the interwar years starting in 1927. These exercises could have been incredibly important in helping the RAF develop an air doctrine that matched the actual capabilities of its aircraft.¹⁹⁵ Instead, as Tami Davis Biddle has shown, the trials were simply used to bolster “Trenchardian assumptions” and inconvenient results were simply explained away or dismissed altogether.¹⁹⁶ Still, coordinating large numbers of aircraft during the Air Exercises at the very least contributed to technical knowledge and one could say the same for the RAF Display and Empire Air Day as well. Empire Air Day provided another justification for an annual event that tested the RAF as an organization.

¹⁹² For an account on American pilots, see Samuel Hynes, *The Insubstantial Air: American Flyers in the First World War* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2014).

¹⁹³ *The Times*, June 26, 1937.

¹⁹⁴ *Daily Herald*, June 17, 1927.

¹⁹⁵ Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 197.

¹⁹⁶ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 89-90.

Both Hendon and Empire Air Day required large-scale planning and intensive training. Of course, despite the Air Ministry's persistent claims to the contrary, much of this planning and training concerned itself more with showmanship than with war in the air. Experts, however, defended most of the elements on display at Hendon as demonstrating practical skills resulting from the culmination of training. The justifications for the air display in the 1930s at Heliopolis in Egypt showed an earnest belief by some in the Air Ministry that such displays improved fighting effectiveness.¹⁹⁷ The “set piece,” however, served a different function:

The only concession to the demand for a show at Hendon is the set piece at the end of the programme. From the pure utility point of view the set piece could probably be dispensed with without harm. But, although it may have no value as a stimulus to training for members of the R.A.F., the set piece does serve, year by year, to impress upon the minds of the public the great and increasing powers of aircraft as weapons of war.¹⁹⁸

In this endeavor, the RAF found itself in an amenable environment. The RAF found more difficulty not in trying to impress the public with the “great and increasing powers of aircraft,” but in conveying a narrower message about the power of the bomber vis-à-vis the fighter.

The RAF Displays as Actionable Propaganda

The French sociologist Jacques Ellul divided propaganda into two types: agitation and integration. Agitation propaganda, according to Ellul, “aims at rapid, violent action, [and it] must arouse feelings of frustration, conflict, and aggression, which lead individuals to

¹⁹⁷ AIR 20/673; FO 141/646. The RAF also staged air displays in Delhi. The analysis of these displays taking place outside of the metropole would make for an interesting study.

¹⁹⁸ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, June 30, 1930.

action.” Integration propaganda, on the other hand, “seeks man's conformity with his group (including participation in action), will aim at the reduction of tensions, adjustment to the environment, and acceptance of the symbols of authority.”¹⁹⁹ The transition from the RAF Display to Empire Air Day reflects a shift from agitation propaganda to integration propaganda. Having secured its independence and funding, the RAF no longer needed to “lead individuals to action.” The focus, rather, shifted to impressing the public, informing it about the service's progress, and readying the British people for a potential war. The RAF needed to seek “man's conformity with his group, “aim at the reduction of tensions,” adjust the public to their “environment,” and foster acceptance of the RAF's “authority.” The *Air Review* noted that Empire Air Day in 1936 seemed to represent a role reversal: it was now the public encouraging the RAF to show more enthusiasm for aerial spectacle while the RAF seemed reticent to let anything get in the way of training and expansion.²⁰⁰

Each military branch produced remarkably popular military displays during the interwar period. Indeed, demand for military spectacle seemed to be almost infinitely elastic. The differences between each service's military displays, however, prevent an apples to apples comparison of their relative popularity. Navy Week started later than the Aldershot Tattoo and the RAF Aerial Pageant. Navy Week, as the name suggests, also extended over a week and took place at multiple locations. The Aldershot Tattoo, meanwhile, existed alongside other popular military tattoos and each tattoo took place over multiple days. Meanwhile, the RAF Air Display lasted only a day or two, depending on whether rehearsals

¹⁹⁹ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 188.

²⁰⁰ *Air Review*, March 1936, 13-14.

are included. Simply establishing popularity would also do little to establish the reasons for this popularity and an understanding of the impact the shows had on the public. In one of the most thoughtful articles published on the RAF Display, the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* paused to reflect upon the “chief secret of its appeal.” The article was published in 1929, when the Display had become well-established as “one of the most popular open-air events of the London season.” The newspaper wondered if the Display's popularity simply came from the “spectacular feats performed by the most brilliant young pilots in the country” before suggesting it rested on something much deeper. The article deserves to be quoted at length:

But exciting spectacles are, after all, fairly common nowadays, both in a sphere of sport and in that of entertainment. It seems probable that the display draws the crowd for other reasons too – largely, perhaps, because a spectator with any imagination can feel himself present at the beginning of a new age, during which the conquest of the air will inevitably reflect itself not only in changed daily habits but in a changed human temperament. [. . .] We do not know what sort of place the world will become when flying is as common as motoring is to-day. [. . .] Here, we feel, is the unmistakable beginning of a quite new epoch in human history. [. . .] The evolutions carried out at the display have a military value, but their value is by no means purely military. They show us, with a completeness and an efficiency which no civil flying organisation could at present equal, first how far the conquest of the air has gone. [. . .] Nor is there much evidence that even the more obviously military episodes of the display do actually rouse the slightest militaristic feeling. In so far as the spectators are made to think of war, they are most likely, perhaps, to be led to recollect the devastating horrors of air raids. [. . .] Flying, whether as a spectacle or as an experience, seems rather, to encourage a refreshing detachment from earthly evils and human hostilities.²⁰¹

Aerial displays suggested to viewers “the beginning of a new age” or a “new epoch in human history” that could change the “human temperament.” If naval and army displays relied upon pageantry and its selective linking of the past to the present, air force pageantry (if one could

²⁰¹ Ibid, July 15, 1929.

call it that) focused on the present and the limitless future. The RAF sought to imbue its displays with the same gravitas of tradition found at the naval and army pageantry of the interwar period, but these efforts ultimately came off contrived. RAF pageantry was *ersatz* pageantry. Aviation created a sharp divide from the past; the continuity at the heart of pageantry was an impossibility.²⁰²

Fundamentally and inescapably modern in their outlook, the aerial displays of the period shared more in common in this regard with the mass spectacles of military propaganda in Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, or Fascist Italy than they had with the Aldershot Tattoo, Navy Week, or the Greenwich Night Pageant. While it is true that the latter were themselves products of modernity, they were fundamentally conservative in their outlook. Army and naval pageantry demonstrated how both services had done well in the past in defending and preserving Britain. Kenneth Minogue distinguishes between “patriotism,” which features “attachment to an actual community,” and “nationalism,” which features enthusiasm for “a fantasy community.”²⁰³ In this regard, RAF displays were more nationalistic than the more patriotic displays of the other two services. The RAF displays almost skirted history altogether, thereby avoiding politically or culturally divisive issues and producing propaganda well-suited to engendering the broadest possible support in an increasingly democratic society.²⁰⁴ The RAF displays did not have much “history” to use in its pageantry,

²⁰² Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers*, 161.

²⁰³ Alex King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 240.

²⁰⁴ David Edgerton has pointed out that the changes to the franchise “were slower, more complicated and more dependent on unfamiliar arguments than might be supposed. For example, it was not until 1950 that it could be said that all adults were equally entitled to cast a vote.” Still, the franchise tripled in 1918 from what it was in 1910 and changes in the 1920s to equalize the franchise for men and women would greatly expand the electorate for the 1929 election. David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 38-39.

but this is not to say that RAF propaganda did not benefit from a particular understanding of “History.” RAF propaganda often suggested a sort of technological determinism or fatalism. Bernhard Rieger has argued that although the First World War destroyed many beliefs and assumptions, it did not wholly destroy the Edwardian faith in technology. The British people believed technology could be the key in holding off decline or pushing forward social progress.²⁰⁵ These very different ideological impulses of preservation and progress meant that support for technology spanned the political spectrum perhaps more than any other single phenomenon. A vague concept, perhaps, but one that nonetheless worked in the RAF's favor in producing its own propaganda that could not avoid a certain resonance with the broader subject of technology's role in Britain's future.

Jacques Ellul argues that “propaganda must be based on current beliefs and symbols to reach man and win him over. On the other hand, propaganda must also follow the general direction of evolution, which includes the belief in progress.”²⁰⁶ The reception of the RAF's aerial displays seem to support Ellul's views on propaganda. Ellul emphasizes that propaganda cannot be used to weave opinions out of whole cloth, but is instead “a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals.”²⁰⁷ It is quite clear that the RAF's aerial displays pushed the public towards greater support for “air power.” This cannot be measured in sheer numerical terms by looking at attendance figures. Army, naval, and air force displays of the interwar period all drew huge numbers of people and the demand for each almost

²⁰⁵ Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity*, 47, 225.

²⁰⁶ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 40.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 61.

seemed insatiable. The best way of understanding the effects of each services' propaganda is to look at the content and reception. Ellul even doubts the usefulness of public surveys in assessing the effectiveness of propaganda. For Ellul, "propaganda operates increasingly on the qualitative level, in the domain of intensities." Any evaluation of its effectiveness must rely on "the use of our general knowledge of man and his socio-political environment, by a mixture of judgments and approximation, and by the best possible use of the clearest reasons."²⁰⁸

What separated RAF propaganda at its displays from that of the other two services was that it was what one might call "actionable." As Ellul points out:

The progress of technology is continuous; propaganda must voice this reality, which is one of man's convictions. All propaganda must play on the fact that the nation will be industrialized, more will be produced, greater progress is imminent, and so on. No propaganda can succeed if it defends outdated production methods or obsolete social or administrative institutions. Though occasionally advertising may profitably evoke the good old days, political propaganda may not. Rather, it must evoke the future, the tomorrow that beckons, precisely because such visions impel the individual to act.

"It is much easier," he continues, "to sell a man an electric razor than a straight-edged one."²⁰⁹ The Royal Navy and the British Army were straight-edged razors. The RAF Displays forcefully raised the specter of the future and, whether from fear or hope, spurred greater "air-mindedness." The success of this propaganda nevertheless remained limited. Ellul explains the difficulties of producing effective propaganda in a free or democratic society in which information is decentralized: "Propaganda made by the democracies is ineffective, paralyzed, mediocre. [. . .] [W]hen various propagandas are permitted to express themselves

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 269-270, 277.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 40-41.

they become ineffective with respect to their immediate objective.”²¹⁰ If RAF propaganda helped to promote “air-mindedness,” its more narrow messaging on colonial policing or the doctrine of the counter-offensive often fell flat or came up against strong, conflicting public discourses or “myths.” For example, the persistence of the individualist strain in British culture helped maintain the appeal of the fighter pilot even as the mass formation flight seemed to some “enlightened” observers to usher in his obsolescence. The myth of the fighter-pilot hero undoubtedly helped make the RAF displays more appealing.²¹¹ The hero's prominence at aerial displays contradicted the RAF's messaging, however, about the strategy of the bomber counter-offensive. Critiques of colonialism and militarism also caused the RAF to modify the content of its displays at times. Demonstrations of colonial policing, one of the reasons for the RAF's survival as an independent branch, faced serious criticism. The RAF moved away from depictions of colonial policing for different reasons, but it is unlikely that it could have bucked the pressure for long. Public pressure succeeded, after all, in forcing the RAF to stop depicting “the enemy” at displays as a real country. As was the case at Aldershot, and to a lesser extent at Navy Week, RAF displays became a site of intensive public discourse. This discourse reveals no hegemonic force imposing its views or manipulating public opinion. Priya Satia has written that democracy in interwar Britain “was not a sham so much as a constant work in progress, as perhaps democracy must be – ever on its guard, ever vigilant, ever straining after the elusive goal of “enlightened public opinion,”

²¹⁰ Ibid, 241.

²¹¹ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 189. Hynes notes that pilots and mountain climbers emerged during this period as two figures who could be admired completely unironically as heroes.

lest is lapse into a populist rubber stamp for the state's misadventures.”²¹² Public opinion, to the extent that it was shaped at military spectacles like Hendon, was a process of give and take. The gap between the ambitions of RAF propaganda and the ultimate results speaks to the strength and openness of British democracy in the interwar period.

²¹² Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 330.

Chapter Five: The Sublime Power of Air Displays and the Politics of Air Power

With pathetic tenacity men cling to the belief that changing circumstances change life. Can a world in which aeroplanes travel at 400 miles per hour, they ask themselves, be the same as one in which there were only steam-engines, laboriously attaining their mile a minute?

----Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Thirties: 1930-1940*

Rachel Holloway discusses the role that fear of nuclear annihilation played in American politics during the Cold War. This fear could justify the status quo or justify change, but it was grounded much more in reality than the fear of the aerial threat in interwar Britain. Nuclear weapons can wipe out civilization. Holloway discusses the “technological sublime,” or the belief in technology's capacity to solve seemingly intractable problems, focusing on Ronald Reagan's use of this rhetoric in defense of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). In Holloway's work, technology is shown to be inherently political.¹ In the interwar period, aircraft could tap into this “technological sublime” far more effectively than any other rival military technology. Interwar British anxiety over the air menace did not emerge from an objective understanding of the actual threat, but was, as Elizabeth Kier argues, always “culturally conditioned.”² Underlying anxieties produced by the traumas of the First World War and widespread perceptions of a society in need of drastic change helped to magnify the political resonance of air power. Tami Davis Biddle argues that the interwar years fostered “an atmosphere of anxiety that nurtured alarmist prognostications and ultimately stirred

¹ Holloway, “The Strategic Defense Initiative and the Technological Sublime,” 209-211.

² Kier, *Imagining War*, 38.

support for the RAF in political circles. This atmosphere proved to be a growth medium for air force institutional interests.”³ The aerial displays of the period both contributed to, and benefited from, this “growth medium” of anxiety, fear, and, hope.

Anxiety and enthusiasm for air power often represented two sides of the same coin. Britons from across the political spectrum exhibited both. The rise to prominence of air power as the nation's preferred first line of defense is also not easily explained by the British tradition of “liberal militarism.” Instead, the fascination with air power suggested by the reception of interwar air displays indicates a public consensus modernist in outlook and increasingly distant from the classical liberalism that sustained support for the Royal Navy as the Senior Service for so long.⁴ Unable and unwilling to present air power in a realistic light, the RAF's air displays at Hendon and Empire Air Day remained vague enough to appeal to the fancy of a broad spectrum of the British public. As a site of public discourse, air displays contributed much to the emotional resonance of air power, but little to the public's understanding of air power's limitations.

War as a Useful Conceit.

Scholars such as Tami Davis Biddle have argued that “aviation held strong connections to the right-wing in England.”⁵ For Biddle, the RAF and the British people managed to win the Second World War despite “right-wing” assumptions about air power,

³ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 79.

⁴ For useful discussions of modernism in Britain that have informed this dissertation, See Gerwin Strobl, *The Germanic Isle: Nazi Perceptions of Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Peter Mandler, “Against “Englishness”: English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850-1940,” *Transactions of Royal Historical Society* 7 (1997): 155-175.

⁵ *Ibid*, 158.

which first produced diplomatic cowardice in the shape of appeasement and then military unpreparedness in the shape of a highly questionable (from a moral and practical standpoint) strategic bomber offensive. Biddle makes a clear connection between the right and air power on the one hand and air power enthusiasm and the failures of interwar diplomacy and strategy on the other. Likewise, in his dissertation, “Right Modern: Technology, Nation, and Britain's Extreme Right in the Interwar Period, 1919-1940,” Patrick Glenn Zander makes an explicit connection between right-wing modernism and a fascination with air power. Zander asserts, “the far right discussed the power of high technology [aircraft being a primary example] in the same terms it described the power of authoritarian government. Technology was powerful and lethal – it carried with it the force to sweep away the old (like speed records or older models) and power its way to new heights.”⁶ While Zander recognizes that the left “understood” the modernist language used by the right in the interwar period, his work focuses on the specific relationship between right-wing ideology and air power.⁷ Figures on the left, it is true, were often more enthusiastic about the internationalization of air power than those on the right like C.G. Grey, J.F.C. Fuller, or P.R.C. Groves; however, the assumptions about the dangers and the possibilities represented by air power were basically the same on both the left and right. H.G. Wells, L.E.O. Charlton, and G.T. Garratt, three leftist figures Zander ignores, shared with the right the same mix of modernizing fetishism and air-mindedness.

The right-wing J.F.C. Fuller's call for discipline and his dissatisfaction with political

⁶ Patrick Glenn Zander, “Right Modern: Technology, Nation, and Britain's Extreme Right in the Interwar Period, 1919-1940” (PhD diss., Georgia Institute of Technology, 2009), 329.

⁷ Ibid, 330.

and military traditions were shared with L.E.O Charlton and G.T. Garratt. In 1938, Charlton and Garratt published, along with Reginald Fletcher, *The Air Defence of Britain*. Geoffrey Theodore Garratt was a Labour activist, an ardent supporter of Republican Spain, and an advocate for Indian independence. He firmly believed in the tremendous danger air strikes posed to modern urban populations. In his contribution to *The Air Defence of Britain*, Garratt charged that the British government, dominated by an ignorant, smug, and old-fashioned elite, was ignoring the threat an air strike posed to the poorest Britons. “There was a kind of picnic atmosphere about our precautions, a reliance on our genius for “muddling through.”” While this may have “worked well enough in the age of horses [...],” he suggested, “it will not necessarily save us in the new mechanical world which is so much less suited to our national “tempo.””⁸ A group of Cambridge scientists had made similar criticisms a year earlier in *The Protection of the Public from Aerial Attack*. Published and distributed by the Left Book Club, the book reported on scientific experiments performed to test the government's air raid precautions. The authors also criticized the government's unwillingness to take the drastic steps needed to protect the populace. Air raid precautions, they emphasized, showed a clear middle-class bias and ignored the poor. The Cambridge scientists also implied that the government was right to be concerned about the potential for panic and revolutionary angst amongst the poor under the strains of an air attack; however, it was the government's malfeasance that was to blame for such revolutionary potential.⁹

⁸ G.T. Garratt, “Air Raid Precautions,” in *The Air Defence of Britain* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1938), 120.

⁹ A Group of Cambridge Scientists, *The Protection of the Public from Aerial Attack* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), 38. These experiments included testing claims by the government that one could gas-proof a house or reinforce individual homes against incendiary bombs.

Like these Cambridge scientists, G.T. Garratt despaired at the government's air raid precautions, which focused on protecting the “individual Englishman and his family in his home,” assuming every family lived in a house sturdy enough to withstand an air raid.¹⁰ Garratt believed a revolution by the lower classes under the strains of aerial bombardment would be the proper comeuppance for “the sins of our parents, who first made the slums, and then allowed the evil system to continue.”¹¹ Historians have noted that many air enthusiasts feared an air strike would create an opening for communist revolutionaries. Garratt believed that a Fascist fifth column posed a greater threat.¹² If the British government had provided more housing for the poor and more government support in general, Garrett pointed out, the East End (London's principal working class neighborhood) would not have been a hotbed of revolutionary agitation in the event of an air strike. He thought that the planning required to prepare an urban population for an air strike could help to usher in the radical changes he believed were necessary. For Garratt, largely building off of his experience in socialist Spain, the mere performance of air raid precaution drills done in a “completely “classless” manner” could effectuate a much-needed social revolution.¹³ The existential threat of the air raid could promote a sense of equality in the face of death.

Air Commodore L.E.O. Charlton witnessed the brutality of aerial bombardment in Iraq in the 1920s and emerged as a vocal critic of British “aerial policing” in the Middle East. Retiring from military service in protest against what he saw firsthand in Iraq, Charlton

¹⁰ Ibid, 124.

¹¹ Garratt, “Air Raid Precautions,” 147.

¹² Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 79; Garratt, “Air Raid Precautions,” 141.

¹³ Garratt, “Air Raid Precautions,” 158.

became a full-time writer and air power theorist.¹⁴ A man firmly of the left – a member of the Union of Friendship and a Republican sympathizer during the Spanish Civil War – his prognostications on the overwhelming destructiveness of aerial bombardment were not simply a result of his personal observations.¹⁵ Much like Fuller, Charlton looked at liberal democracy and saw it wanting. In *The Air Defence of Britain*, Charlton asserted that “the less inured to mass discipline its people, so much the more vulnerable will that city be” to aerial bombing.¹⁶ A people that had accepted a “the methods of totalitarian war” would hold out the longest in a war featuring air strikes.¹⁷ Charlton also called for an even greater break from the liberal economic orthodoxy he believed was limiting Britain's defense expenditure during the 1930s: “We are now attempting to provide this need without interference with industry at large [...] meanwhile the rival whom we dread, and with good reason, too, has made, and is still making, her national effort under a dictatorial regime, and is becoming the hare to our tortoise in the race of life.” Charlton called for the “clamp of officialdom to be thrown off and trained intelligences be given full play.”¹⁸ This temptation to look with envy at authoritarian state-planning in the face of some perceived technological hurdle persists today with respect to green energy or 5G technology.

Air power served as a useful conceit for the British left. Aerial bombardment would reveal the weaknesses, or even the obsolescence, of open, market-based, liberal-democratic societies. The next war would provide the British a rude awakening, but it would ultimately

¹⁴ Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 249.

¹⁵ Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, 175.

¹⁶ L.E.O. Charlton, “The New Factor in Warfare,” 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 110.

reveal the need for more centralized planning and a solution to the “ant-like slum life” of the cities.¹⁹ For Charlton, liberal democracies could not compete with militaristic dictatorships in promoting the discipline necessary for a population to withstand aerial bombardment. Aerial bombardment represented the military equivalent of the turmoil of late-stage capitalism. Either one would precede inevitable revolution and the creation of a more just society. Published in 1919, George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* ends with an air raid. After the bombs stop, one character complains of “how damnably dull the world has become again.” Another declares it was “a glorious experience” and hopes “they'll come again tomorrow night.”²⁰ Shaw suggests that even with the destruction of the Great War, the world still needed to be wiped clean and society needed to be given direction. For figures like Charlton, the question seemed to be, “why wait for the bombs?”

In his novel *War Over England*, Charlton described in detail a surprise attack from the air at the RAF Display at Hendon, “the great event of the year.” The RAF Display featured “a truly representative concourse, a veritable section of the totality of class. It can be likened to a large slice of cherry cake with all the fruit collected at the top.” Such an attack, Charlton prophesied, would be “almost mortal.” Perhaps as much as forty percent of the RAF's equipment and personnel would be wiped out in an instant.²¹ Charlton also estimated that approximately 150,000 Britons would die in the accompanying bombing attacks elsewhere.²² The British would eventually lose this war: “ruthlessness in dictatorship form had won the

¹⁹ L.E.O. Charlton, *War Over England* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), 244.

²⁰ George Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 160

²¹ Charlton, *War over England*, 158-161.

²² *Ibid*, 163.

day and democratic methods of rule, both monarchic and republican had no machinery of compulsion.”²³ Out of the ashes of defeat in this war, however, Charlton predicted a new, more egalitarian society. A “new architecture” would emerge, transforming urban space: “[S]lum demolition was carried out, city extension planned, and population increase located.”²⁴ Class differences would recede. The country would not necessarily be rich, but its people would be content. Politics and political disagreement would become unknown, while English discipline would become the envy of the world.²⁵ A “Court of Equity” led by great men would arbitrate international disputes and an air police force would be established and placed under international control.²⁶ Nelson would even be removed from atop his column for being “too much of an idol in the past, turning men's thoughts to sea-power only as the source of England's might, and that as such his feet were now of clay.”²⁷

Such prophecy is a means of wresting “evidence” from the future to support ideas in the present. Charlton believed that air power represented a fundamentally new stage in history that would lead to a revolutionary social transformation. This was a sort of military science version of dialectical materialism. Charlton laid out his theory of history in “Air Power and the Principal of Parity,” a paper he presented at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in 1938. Air power, Charlton argued, was “much more than a mere development in military technique: it is a new and revolutionary method of waging war. And as it fulfills its destiny it will profoundly affect the life of this and future generations, their habits and their

²³ Ibid, 238.

²⁴ Ibid, 265.

²⁵ Ibid, 269.

²⁶ Ibid, 287.

²⁷ Ibid, 253.

mode of thought.”²⁸ Armies and navies had served their purpose and they gave a particular shape to nations, cities, and all aspects of day-to-day life:

Our whole social edifice, in fact, as it exists to-day, has been built up from a ground plan which was drawn for it in accordance with a defensive scheme; and it rests finally on a foundation of armed force which itself has been the slow product of time. Each separate family in the huge apartment house hopes for permanence of occupation as a result of the fighting efficiency with which the development of military science has endowed the modern army and the modern navy. If therefore (and here, if I may so express myself, I am getting near the knuckle) these old foundations should be severely shaken, it is not unnatural to presume that the structure which has been raised above them will be badly rocked. Well, they are at this very moment imminently threatened with something in the nature of an earthquake, and the centre of the seismic disturbance is in the air.²⁹

Charlton relegated armies and navies to an old world of poverty and inequality. Air power, he believed, would eventually fulfill its “destiny” and create a new world similar to a socialist utopia.

Some on the left saw the threat of air power as an incentive, or an excuse, for initiating government measures to push Britain leftward. This should not come as a surprise. Figures on the left, going back to the origins of our understanding of “left” and “right” in the French Revolution, have often understood war and war planning as tools to unify the population in pursuit of radical change. As Randolph Bourne once put it, “war is the health of the state.” Historical axioms are hard to come by, but the tendency of war to enlarge the size and scope of government comes close. Marx's very understanding of history necessitated

²⁸ L.E.O. Charlton, “Air Parity and the Principle of Parity,” *Royal Institute of International Affairs* 17, No. 4 (July-August 1938), 494,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 498. Both J.F.C. Fuller and Bernard Acworth were present at the the discussion of this paper. Unsurprisingly, while Fuller mostly agreed with Charlton excepting a few quibbles, Acworth found little to commend in Charlton's argument. Acworth even suggested that the progress of aircraft over its short lifespan compared rather poorly to the progress of railroads over a similar period of time. For Fuller's and Acworth's contributions, see pg. 505-506.

conflict and Lenin sought the “heightened contradictions” of war to help Russia leap forward through historical stages of development. What has often distinguished enthusiasm for war on the left from that of the right is respective judgment about the means and ends. The German nationalist and veteran of the First World War Ernst Jünger, for example, saw war itself as a transcendental experience that raised the soldier beyond the banal and materialistic life of the civilian world. War was an end in itself *for the soldier*.³⁰ On the other hand, William James – one of the founders of American Pragmatism and a leading light of the Progressive movement – hoped that mankind could find a way to imbue civilians *in peacetime* with the virtues of the soldier at war. In “The Moral Equivalent of War,” a speech he delivered at Stanford University eight years before the outbreak of the First World War, James professed his belief “in the reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of socialistic equilibrium.” In this socialistic future, however, the “martial values must be the enduring cement: intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon which states are built.” These martial virtues, “although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods.”³¹ James supported the wholesale conscription of the public to wage “war” against “nature” as coal miners, fishermen, road-builders, and other types of manual laborers. “We should be owned,” James argued, “as soldiers are by the army, and our pride would rise accordingly.”³² James lamented that war had been “the only force that disciplines a whole

³⁰ Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, translated by Michael Hofman (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 5.

³¹ William James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” in *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 327

³² *Ibid*, xxvi.

community,” but he hoped that enlightened social policy could find “a moral equivalent.”³³

The First World War did indeed bring dramatic proof of the power of war to strengthen the collective (the state) at the expense of the individual. In 1915, Percy MacKaye, the American dramatist and poet, took note of the miserable pity of war, but also seized the moment to argue for the urgency of finding James's “moral equivalent.” “The prevailing conditions of peace are drab and selfish” while the qualities of war consisted of “self-sacrifice, energized will, solidarity, courageous fighting, devotion to a cause deemed holy.”³⁴ MacKaye supported the use of “dramatic engineering” to organize “militant social service as an effectual substitute for war.”³⁵ He urged the use of art as propaganda to unify the people in pursuit of state-determined goals and the fostering of martial virtues. Indeed, Alex King has noted how commemorations of the Great War “played on the pathological aspects of grief, and set out deliberately to prolong them, in order to improve, morally and politically, post-war society.”³⁶ While military tattoos and, to a lesser extent, Navy Week were well-equipped to exploit the grief of the First World War, the RAF Display could more effectively exploit the fear of the next war. As the post-war era began to seem to be an interwar period, the emotive power of the RAF's displays grew accordingly. James' hope took root in the interwar period as many observers took stock of the “positives” that came out of the First World War. Malcolm Muggeridge noted the popularity of William James's idea in the 1930s among those on the left, but he dismissed the notion in his own inimitable way. “The trouble

³³ Ibid, 172.

³⁴ Percy MacKaye, “A Potential Substitute for War” *The North American Review* 201, No. 714 (May 1915), 723.

³⁵ Ibid, 726.

³⁶ King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain*, 221.

is that war has no moral equivalent,” Muggeridge argued, “any more than incest has; and if it had a moral equivalent, this would be as deplorable as, if not more deplorable than, war itself.”³⁷ War, in other words, was a necessary evil at best. “Whiggish” historians often saw in great generals or wars contributors to progress, but such progress always signified the expansion of English liberty and the aggrandizement of the individual.³⁸ The “martial virtues” had to be isolated from civilian life as much as possible and should be used in defense of civilians rather than as models of behavior for civilians. As William Ewart Gladstone put it, “a standing army can never be turned into a moral institution.”³⁹ The propaganda of the Royal Navy and the British Army operated within this tradition, and with these suppositions, much more so than the Royal Air Force did.

Militarism Versus Civilianism.

Historians have overlooked how widespread militarist ideas – properly defined – became during the interwar period during an era of receding traditional liberalism. Michael Howard has defined militarism as:

an acceptance of the values of the military subculture as the dominant values of society: a stress on hierarchy and subordination in organization, on physical courage and self-sacrifice in personal behavior, on the need for heroic leadership in situations of extreme stress: all based on an acceptance of the inevitability of armed conflict within the states-system and the consequent need to develop the qualities necessary to conduct it.⁴⁰

Howard goes on to describe how the First World War helped influence the spread of militarism:

³⁷ Muggeridge, *The Thirties*, 43.

³⁸ Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 166-167.

³⁹ Quoted in Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, 158.

⁴⁰ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109-110.

For although the experience of the Great War did produce in many countries a deep and widespread reaction against the militarism of the pre-war years, this reaction was by no means universal. There were many who, emerging from an apparently unstable world of national loyalties and traditional values into one of chaos, defeat, and revolution, felt themselves betrayed; who sought for scapegoats; who tried to recreate the glamour and security of military hierarchies within new populist organizations; and who saw in the use of violence the path to power both in domestic and international politics.⁴¹

Howard has in mind the “populist” movements of the right, but all the characteristics of militarism defined here can be found in James, MacKaye, Charlton, and Wells. Air force displays, and air power propaganda in general, tapped into this new brew of militarism most effectively during the interwar period. The First World War tested the wisdom or permanence of the liberal notion that military and civilian realms could or should remain separate.⁴² The “maritime school” of British strategic thought, which had its roots in the Elizabethan Era, had always maintained this as a *sine qua non*.⁴³ Wars should be limited, if at all possible. The Royal Navy, in its displays, relied upon this traditional defense of its role and purpose, but belief in “the maritime school” was in disrepair during the interwar period. Howard has described how to many, especially air power enthusiasts, what had won the First World War was “the solidarity of the civilian population behind its leaders, their willingness to go on bearing the burdens of deprivation and suffering.”⁴⁴ The solution to military problems was to be found in militarizing civilians. As Major R. Chenevix-Trench wrote at the time: “in short, the ordinary citizen will have to absorb a lesson in strategy that has been too hard in the past for most statesmen and not a few soldiers.”⁴⁵ Air displays, with bombers ominously flying

⁴¹ Ibid, 118.

⁴² Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 247.

⁴³ Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 179.

⁴⁴ Howard, *War in European History*, 128.

⁴⁵ Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 194-195.

over British cities in simulated bombing runs, obscured the line between military and civilian more effectively than either army or naval displays. While the massive formations of bombers tapped into increasingly common fears of civilian control and indiscipline, the fighters flitting and maneuvering above tapped into a vestigial nostalgia for chivalry and individual mastery. The air displays were perfectly positioned to tap into the desire for “the glamour and security of military hierarchies” found in those enamored (consciously or not) of James's vision of the “moral equivalent of war,” and those who craved “the need for heroic leadership” like Mosley and Fuller.

The idea that militarism is a uniquely “right-wing” phenomenon is particularly prevalent in the Anglosphere. It is much harder to sustain this connection in places like France, Latin America, or Russia, for example. As Vagts has suggested, “there is but one step from the general to the specific, from his [Rousseau's] postulate that “every good citizen owes his talents and lights to society,” to the first French law of conscription, proclaiming that “every Frenchman is a soldier and owes himself to the defense of his country.”⁴⁶ Military service, the notion of citizenship, and a sense of national identity emerged together in France, but similar developments took place in other nations with a revolutionary inheritance.⁴⁷ British national identity, on the other hand, explicitly connected its own dispensation of liberty with the curbing of domestic militarism. The Bill of Rights, after all, forbade the “raising and keeping” of a “standing army” without Parliament's consent. As Linda Colley

⁴⁶ Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, 77.

⁴⁷ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 298.

has argued, the British “defined themselves against the French as they imagined them to be, superstitious, militarist, decadent, and unfree.”⁴⁸ Vagts has argued that the roots of militarism are to be found in the rejection of the rationalism of the Enlightenment among those carried away in the Romantic movement: “The carriers of this tendency were not the middle classes, represented by English utilitarians, Continental liberals and American rationalists of the constitutional period; these were distrustful of militarism, fearing to lose the fruits of their emancipation by such backward yearning for times and institutions hostile to their own developing interests.” The phenomenal success of the interwar air displays seems odd in light of the concurrent rise of pacifism, but Vagts makes a crucial intervention with his distinction between “pacifism” and “civilianism.”

Militarism is thus not the opposite of pacifism; its true counterpart is civilianism. Love of war, bellicosity, is the counterpart of the love of peace, pacifism; but militarism is more, and sometimes less, than the love of war. It covers every system of thinking and valuing and every complex of feelings which rank military institutions and ways above the ways of civilian life, carrying military mentality and modes of acting and decision into the civilian sphere.⁴⁹

The widespread popularity of air displays in interwar Britain can best be explained by a decline in “civilianism,” which itself was a key component of a traditional liberalism increasingly in disrepute.

“Liberal militarism” and Air Power.

As mentioned earlier, David Edgerton has argued that the British embraced air power as a means of countering the non-liberal powers while avoiding the “militarization of British society.” Air power became the successor to naval power as the means of protecting the

⁴⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 6.

⁴⁹ Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, 17.

nation by relying on technology and economic resources rather than manpower. Edgerton has termed this “liberal militarism.” Air power seemed well-suited to defend “a liberal world order” and promote cherished liberal ideas like free trade.⁵⁰ One problem with Edgerton's thesis is that enthusiasm for air power soared between the wars while liberalism declined. His claim that air power fit into Britain's “liberal” approach to warfare is also confusing considering his separate claim that air power enthusiasm was deeply connected to the “ultra right.”⁵¹ Edgerton notes that “elements of the left shared the general enthusiasm for the heroic potential of aircraft, [. . . but] aeroplanes were overwhelmingly associated with the right.”⁵² Why would the ultra right find the airplane with its so-called tendency to limit the militarization of society and promote a liberal world order appealing? Is it really such an unarguably “liberal” idea to use airplanes as a weapon to put into the “hands of a world authority” to “bring the world to its liberal senses”?⁵³ Rather than looming as a means of “limiting the militarization of British society,” air power seemed to many to finally have confirmed such a notion's obsolescence and open up possibilities for a fundamental transformation of British society that would take it beyond its liberal, overly individualistic past.

In England and the Aeroplane: Militarism, Modernity and Machines, Edgerton provided a riposte to “declinist” British historians found on the left and right. Perry Anderson on the left and Corelli Barnett and Martin Wiener on the right all argued that Britain's decline

⁵⁰ David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: Militarism, Modernity and Machines* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), xxi.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, xxiii.

⁵² *Ibid*, 74.

⁵³ *Ibid*, xxi.

in the twentieth century stemmed from the British elite's lack of interest in, or understanding of, technology.⁵⁴ For Barnett, in particular, the strength of the interwar pacifist movement and a lack of government interest in the promotion of aviation hamstrung British power, leaving the British vulnerable to German provocation and unprepared for the Second World War.⁵⁵ Edgerton sought to upturn this thesis, instead focusing on how England's commitment “to the aeroplane exemplifies a commitment to armed force, science, technology and industry.”⁵⁶ A sweeping thesis like Edgerton's inevitably raises important questions and prompts a certain amount of clarification.

Edgerton and others have overlooked two factors in properly assessing the nature of interwar air enthusiasm: left-wing fascination with air power and the common characteristics of air power skeptics. Edgerton does recognize that “a liberal-internationalist, and thus anti-nationalist and anti-fascist ideology, was fundamental to British enthusiasm for the aeroplane, and for bombing, from the interwar years.”⁵⁷ This analysis overlooks more classical liberals who were all these things and yet did not become enamored of air power. In order to properly understand enthusiasm for the airplane, it is important to consider what groups resisted the trend. As I have suggested earlier, respect for tradition and classical liberalism (alongside naval institutional biases) often correlated with the absence of air power enthusiasm. Edgerton mentions Liddell Hart only twice in *England and the Aeroplane*, but he does discuss Liddell Hart's “British Way in Warfare” slightly more in his later work, *Warfare*

⁵⁴ Ibid, xvii.

⁵⁵ Ibid, xix.

⁵⁶ Ibid, xxxi.

⁵⁷ Ibid, xx.

State: Britain, 1920-1970. Edgerton even notes that “The British Way in Warfare” exhibited a strategy of “liberal militarism” in its desire to limit “the negative consequences of militarism.”⁵⁸ What he neglects to mention is the almost universally understood corollary of the belief in the potency of air power: that “civilian” life in wartime and the limitation of war were obsolete notions. A truly liberal, anti-militaristic view of military strategy could *only* emerge in minds (like Liddell Hart’s) unconvinced that air power had ushered in an epochal shift in human civilization. As Richard Overy has argued, “the discourse on war defined the nature of future conflict not as limited police actions or small-scale intervention but always in millennial language.”⁵⁹ Bertrand Russell admitted at the time that “the form of government, in every country exposed to serious war, will be such as airmen will like, which is not likely to be democracy.”⁶⁰ Wells, Charlton, Mosley, Fuller and other air power enthusiasts all agreed with this statement; they simply imagined, or hoped, for a different colored armband adorning the leaders of a future “air-minded” regime.⁶¹ As Peter Fritzsche has argued, “airmindedness” almost always implied the “social discipline of the state.”⁶² As a result, the airplane could not have served as the successor to the warship as a means of limiting the militarization of society.

“The most peaceful of activities:” H.G. Wells's Technocratic Militarism.

⁵⁸ David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 55-56.

⁵⁹ Overy, *The Twilight Years*, 319.

⁶⁰ Bertrand Russell quoted in Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 78.

⁶¹ J.H. Grainger argues that “the military life and military virtues were deplored” in the 1930s by the British elite. As this dissertation has suggested, a distinction must be made between a hatred of the military (as it existed) versus a hatred of the underlying military virtues. Wells, for example, clearly admired the latter and had no time for the former. J.H. Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain, 1900-1939* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 329.

⁶² Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers*, 219.

Examining figures on the left ignored in previous scholarship helps explain the broad appeal of air power. L.E.O. Charlton and G.T. Garratt, for example, figures clearly to the left of mere liberalism, are not accounted for at all by Edgerton. Meanwhile, Edgerton uses H.G. Wells as a stand-in for “liberal internationalism” and describes his view of the antithetical nature of technology and war as being consistent with the “nineteenth-century liberal tradition.” In the next sentence, however, Edgerton notes that Wells still believed war would “be necessary” to destroy “the old, heroic military ethos.”⁶³ If one thinks war is *necessary* for progress and eagerly awaits what progress will bring, can one actually claim to be anti-war? Wells's enthusiasm for air power was not rooted in his liberalism, but in his technological fetishism, hatred for the old order, and his desire for a planned society managed by a technocratic elite.

Like Garratt and Charlton, H.G. Wells was a man of the left and his fascination with air power was not some anomalous right-wing trait at odds with his overarching worldview, nor was it a natural expression of his “liberalism.” In 1941, George Orwell wrote an essay entitled “Wells, Hitler and the World State,” in which he described Wells as a man trapped in the Edwardian Era and, therefore, fundamentally unable to understand the madness of men like Hitler and how science could be used for ill. But if Wells was a man *of* the Edwardian Era, he was most definitely not a man *for* the Edwardian Era.⁶⁴ Wells consistently assailed Britain's sluggish traditionalism and excessive individualism. He represented the “Edwardian progressive-liberal-socialist quest for planned social reform” and became one of the more

⁶³ Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, 71-72.

⁶⁴ Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 11.

prominent members of the Fabian Society, but his liberalism did not extend too far beyond his admiration of science, the belief in progress, a hatred for military men, and his devotion to internationalism. Wells rejected economic liberalism, for example, and found much to admire in the military way of life if not the soldiers themselves.⁶⁵ William James found inspiration in Wells's own description of the military virtues:

In many ways [. . .] military organization is the most peaceful of activities. When the contemporary man steps from the street, of clamorous insincere advertisement, push, adulteration, underselling and intermittent employment into the barrack-yard, he steps on to a higher social plane, into an atmosphere of service and cooperation and of infinitely more honorable emulations.⁶⁶

In describing Wells's views, Orwell writes: “Much of what Wells has imagined and worked for is physically there in Nazi Germany. The order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the concrete, the aeroplanes [sic], are all there, but all in the service of ideas appropriate to the Stone Age.”⁶⁷ Wells's fascination with air power was inextricably connected to his belief that older institutions needed to be abandoned and replaced with a technocratically managed society more in line with an increasingly technological age.⁶⁸ Aircraft, symbolically looming as a potentially cataclysmic force or as a technological panacea, had always been a central component in Wells's *oeuvre* going back at least to his novel *The War in the Air*, published in 1908. Wells later wrote that perhaps the key insight of *The War in the Air* was his recognition that air warfare had abolished the war front “and with

⁶⁵ Ibid, 9-11.

⁶⁶ James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” 172.

⁶⁷ George Orwell, “Wells, Hitler and the World State,” in *My Country Right or Left, 1940-1943*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 143.

⁶⁸ I.F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763-3749*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 87.

that the possibility of distinguishing civilian and combatant.” Civilians could no longer view war “as a vivid spectacle in which his participation is that of a paying spectator at a cricket or base-ball match.”⁶⁹ Building on themes first established in *The War in the Air*, Wells describes in his novel *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) the destruction of much of the world by air strikes and the world's eventual emergence out of darkness through the creation of an “Air Dictatorship.” This Air Dictatorship polices the world to maintain stability, but it also introduces a managed, technocratic form of world government that destroys “time-honoured traditions;” for Wells, this Air Dictatorship represented real progress.⁷⁰ Edgerton suggests that *The Shape of Things to Come's* plot, in which the technocratic “Airmen” defeat the “anti-technological militarists,” reveals Wells “being faithful to the nineteenth-century liberal tradition, which saw technology and war as antithetical to each other.”⁷¹ It is true that Wells is on the side of technology, but this hardly makes him a liberal. Here, presented in dramatic juxtaposition in the novel's plot, is the Janus-faced nature of air power that made it such a captivating force during this period.⁷² Both views, that it had destructive and redemptive capacities, reflect two underlying assumptions: that modern, specifically British, society was particularly vulnerable to air strikes and that more state planning was needed in a modern

⁶⁹ H.G. Wells quoted in Alfred M. Gollin, “England is No Longer an Island: The Phantom Airship Scare of 1909,” *Albion* 13, No. 1 (Spring 1981), 46.

⁷⁰ H.G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come* (London: Gollancz, 2011), 216.

⁷¹ Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, 70-72. *The Shape of Things to Come* was made into a Hollywood film entitled *Things to Come* in 1936. Produced by Alexander Korda, it starred Raymond Massey as the heroic airman cum Philosopher-King. Edgerton calls the film, “a gospel of hope,” but it was not very well-received by viewers at the time, partly because it was perceived as *too idealistic*. Considering the conclusion of the film (the emergence of a dictatorship of “smart men”), much can be gleaned from the values and aspirations of the era.

⁷² The “Janus” analogy has become something of a cliché in works on air power. See, Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 83; Waqar Zaidi, “The Janus-face of Techno-nationalism: Barnes Wallis and “Strength of England”” *Technology and Culture* 49 (2008): 62-88.

age.

Wells shared with Garratt and Charlton a belief in the supreme threat of aerial bombardment. This followed on his view that the British government did not do enough to manage technology and plan society. Wells's views on air power were also quite similar to those held by Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, and J.F.C. Fuller, one of Mosley's most important supporters. According to Colin Cook, Mosley, from an early stage in his career, believed “modern aviation gave a new perception of nationality and symbolically represented an elite of daring aviators: fascism was also a modern force determined to achieve national regeneration through the leadership of a new elite.”⁷³ Cook claims that both Mosley and Wells believed in a theory of “national decay” and “sickness,” leading them to fear “social disorganization resulting from wars.”⁷⁴ The views of Mosley and Wells (and the views of left-wing and right-wing air power enthusiasts respectively) are also not distinguished from one another by the former's right-wing bellicosity and the latter's left-wing pacifism. As Azar Gat has noted, the BUF presented itself as the “peace party.” Fascism in Britain sought to be “peaceful and non-militaristic, it would infuse the military virtues of courage, honour, self-sacrifice, comradeship, and solidarity into civil life.”⁷⁵ This vision, shared by Wells and James, fits Vagts's, Howard's, and my own definition of militarism. Wells and Mosley abhorred the thought of a massive air strike of an urban population, and, while Fuller advocated the bombing of urban populations, he also believed that the use of

⁷³ Cook, “A Fascist Memory,” 147.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 37.

advanced, non-lethal gases would eventually shorten the duration of a war and make it more humane.⁷⁶

Air Power and the Welfare State.

The connection between the Second World War and the creation of the British welfare state has long been noted. Some scholars, however, have pointed out just how much of this process had roots in the interwar period. Fears of aerial bombardment, in particular, helped shape how the state extended its reach into the civilian sphere both before and during the war. Michele Haapamäki's *The Coming of the Aerial War: Culture and Fear of Airborne Attack in Inter-War Britain* focuses on the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) committee and the political struggle over how best to prepare the civilian population for aerial bombardment. The threat of France's growing air force at a time of tension between the two countries in 1924 prompted the creation of the Air Raid Precautions committee. The committee first convened in May 1924 and issued its first report in 1925. As Barry Powers has argued, from the beginning the committee “evidenced fears based upon Air Ministry prognostications about the awesome threat of the aerial knockout blow.” The committee also advocated for the necessity of greater “control of the civil population,” spawning numerous plans for governmental intervention and cooperation across a number of different government departments.⁷⁷ Debates surrounding ARP both inside and outside of government, as Haapamäki has demonstrated, featured a struggle between those who advocated an approach

⁷⁶ Ibid; Fuller quoted in *Air Review*, November 1935.

⁷⁷ Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 123, 184, 191. That France would appear a threat in 1924 seems absurd today, and, indeed, to many at the time. Trenchard himself dismissed the threat as a “chimera.” Still, the “air scare” proved a useful excuse for air power advocates to push for more funding and revealed the cracks in the Anglo-French *Entente*.

that fitted English values of independence (“a man's home is his castle”) and those with more radical visions of collective shelter.⁷⁸ Partly because of resistance and partly owing to their own political inheritance, the “radical” advocates for greater government involvement in preparing for a “People's War” did not present “a radical break with the status quo towards socialism or a consolidated state” during the interwar period.⁷⁹ Haapamäki depicts a layered discourse concerning ARP similar to the discussions surrounding military displays wherein various strains of old and new political impulses interacted and competed against one another.

Many on the left drew inspiration from a romanticized view of the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War and hoped to see the same type of communal solidarity on display in Britain. J.B.S. Haldane spent time in Republican-controlled Madrid in 1936 and 1937, experiencing air raids firsthand. He later wrote a scathing critique of government air raid precautions entitled *A.R.P.*, which Victor Gollancz included in the Left Book Club in 1938. The book became extremely popular despite the grandiosity of Haldane's recommendations. Like Garratt, Haldane suggested that the government's precautions revealed a middle-class bias; instead, he advocated a complete reorientation of government planning toward a focus on the most vulnerable and the building of a vast, interconnected system of underground tunnels and shelters. According to Haapamäki, Gollancz believed that “the political significance of this book would surpass anything yet published by the club” and that “the

⁷⁸ Michele Haapamäki, *The Coming of the Aerial War: Culture and the Fear of Airborne Attack in Inter-War Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 79.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

critique of ARP was to serve the larger goals of the interwar left.”⁸⁰ The connection between these “radicals” and their underlying belief in the devastating consequences of an air attack without a prior dramatic transformation of society shows how air power could ensorcell the radical left as much as the radical right. Ultimately, the radical plans for mass shelters mostly failed to bear fruit. As Malcolm Smith has pointed out, such plans “required central funding and planning on a much greater scale than the state at that time was prepared to allow.”⁸¹ The Home Office remained unconvinced that such radical plans were feasible and feared large-scale construction would only instill greater fear in the population.⁸² Still, the fight for mass shelters undoubtedly drew the radical and progressive left into the center of discussions about air power on their own terms. “The experience of the First World War,” Haapamäki notes, “proved that government could intervene in the economy, having a positive impact on employment, standards of living, and social welfare.”⁸³ The “moral equivalent of war” had been found not by replacing war itself with some higher principle as James sought, but by simply moving it slightly forward into the frightful future.

Haapamäki's work recounts the development of Britain's welfare state in a longer narrative, which stretches back to the First World War.⁸⁴ Susan Grayzel already emphasized this linking together of the First and Second World Wars in her work, describing how both wars served to erode the distinction between civilian and military targets in the public mind.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Ibid, 79-83.

⁸¹ Smith, *Britain and 1940*, 26.

⁸² Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 47. The Air Ministry voiced fears that emphasis on ARP at Empire Air Days might cause spectators to get the wrong idea about the nature of air power, AIR 2/4421.

⁸³ Ibid, 11.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 10-12.

⁸⁵ Susan Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 94.

Regardless of the merits of attributing the creation of the welfare state to the wartime atmosphere of the Second World War, Haapamäki's and Grayzel's works reveal how many anticipated a "People's War" to provoke government action. As Haapamäki writes, "wartime issues, including class divisions and integration of civilians into the total war, were directly related to the fear of aerial warfare, the debates of the interwar years, and the degree of protection that civilians could expect from their government."⁸⁶ In the 1930s, psychiatrists volunteered their expertise to the Ministry of Health, contributing a scientific patina to dire government expectations of civilian behavior under aerial bombardment. As Tami Davis Biddle has noted, these experts predicted widespread hysteria and "outbreaks of neurosis upon a declaration of war, and especially after the first air raids." Basing its preparations on such "scientific" calculations, the government procured 750,000 beds in preparation of air raids when only 6,000 were ever needed during the worst period of the Blitz.⁸⁷ Dr. John Rickman worried that the civilian population was "not organized into regiments which, by special training and tradition, claim and inspire the self-forgetful devotion of individuals." Dr. Maurice Wright advocated that "the civilian population must be treated as if they were combatant troops; they must be under authority and know what to do and what to avoid doing in case of emergency."⁸⁸ The Labour MP Philip Noel-Baker, inspired by the management of traffic at the Aldershot Tattoo and frightened by the prospect of aerial bombardment, demanded "compulsory powers" as early as 1937.

The Government must not merely have powers of requisition for the transport of very

⁸⁶ Haapamäki, *The Coming of the Aerial War*, 10.

⁸⁷ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 1.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 110.

large numbers of people, but compulsory powers for billeting people in private houses. We must have powers to take over churches and other public buildings where people could be put, and we must take power to overcome vested interests and take over land for the establishment of camps. These difficulties ought to be faced at once; power should be taken now.⁸⁹

As figures like Garratt and Charlton hoped, the threat of air power proved to be a stimulus to state planning, intervention, and the regimentation of daily life.

Richard Titmuss outlined the link between the interwar obsession with air power and the development of the wartime welfare state in his official history of social policy during the Second World War: “The wide range of emergency services, which came into operation in the early days of the war or were in various stages of growth in 1939 and 1940, had behind them a long history of ministerial and departmental planning and discussion.”⁹⁰ The defense and care of the civilian population under aerial bombardment became the primary concern of government planners before the war and in its early stages. “The theory of a 'knock-out.blow.’” Titmuss argued, “which the enemy would aim at the country's nerve centre influenced many of the early plans, and explained much of the birth and development of wartime emergency services.” This fear was widespread and not confined to one group or class.⁹¹ The mass evacuations of women and children from London at the start of the war grew out of these fears, yet they were also instrumental in arousing “the conscience of the nation in the opening phase of the war; much sooner, indeed, than might have been expected from the country's experience in previous war of changes of the conception of the nation's

⁸⁹ Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 25 November 1937 vol 329 cc1437-563.

⁹⁰ Richard Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy in History of the Second World War: United Kingdom Civil Series*, edited by W.K. Hancock (London: HMSO, 1950), 3.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 10-11.

responsibilities towards the poor and distressed.”⁹² A greater awareness of the health and conditions of these poor women and children spurred the nation to reconsider welfare schemes to improve their lot and opened up the path to further extensions of social welfare in the latter stages of the war. As Bernhard Rieger has argued, by muddying the distinction between vulnerable soldier and protected civilian, the airplane introduced a “significant departure from previous notions of national defense.” Nevertheless, even at the outset of the war, the British people believed they would “withstand outside aggression as a result of government planning and psychological strength.”⁹³ Fears of air power help explain the expansion of the welfare state during the Second World War, but the direct connection between the implications of air power and a tendency to rethink the relationship between the civilian/individual and the state is even more apparent. Even without the threat of air power, considering political developments across Europe, this relationship would have likely been a subject of public reconsideration in Britain. The bomber, however, imbued this subject with urgency. Latent in the air displays of the interwar period was this broader debate. The air displays both benefited from this underlying political current and ratcheted up the tension. In general, and despite the technical inadequacies actually besetting the air fleet on display in any given year, the shows at Hendon and Empire Air Day impressed spectators with the wonders of military aviation.⁹⁴ This gave the people more confidence in their Air Force, perhaps, but it only raised the stakes when it came to the broader issue of how a future

⁹² Ibid, 507.

⁹³ Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity*, 242.

⁹⁴ Robert Shay ranks the RAF as possessing the fifth strongest air force in the world in 1931. Considering the strategic responsibilities of the RAF, this ranking should have been disconcerting. Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties*, 20.

society should or must look in an aerial age.

The Broad Ideological Base of Support for Air Power.

There were certainly ideological differences among the air power enthusiasts on matters outside the realm of air power and subtle differences regarding their views on air power itself, but they all shared a belief in the overwhelming threat of aerial bombardment, an obsession with modernity and technology, a distrust of tradition, and a belief in the need for a technocratic elite to manage a planned society. All the air power enthusiasts exhibited a technocratic-modernist rejection of liberalism. Even the right-wing Mosley, Azar Gat suggests, belonged to the “radical and future-oriented, rather than conservative and nostalgic wing” of the European right. Mosley represented a “typical recruit to the modernist brand of proto-fascism.”⁹⁵ Strategists like Liddell Hart and navalists still used an inherited discourse emphasizing the value of Britain's liberal traditions. This is important in the context of broader political developments in Britain during the 1930s. While this period saw the slide of liberalism into decrepitude, it also featured the emergence of a consensus that united a broad swathe of Britain's population concerning the need for planning and newer, more efficient institutions. Of course, in an age which saw the rise of so many authoritarian governments around the world, Britain remained a liberal country in relative terms and remains a beacon of liberalism (and neo-liberalism) today. Elements of Britain's liberal heritage were simply picked up and repackaged by the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. Still, Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann described the 1930s as a radical period in which people

⁹⁵ Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*, 41; Matthew Worley, “Why Fascism? Sir Oswald Mosley and the Conception of the British Union of Fascists” *History* 96, 221 (January 2011): 68.

sought “a sharp breach with traditional forms.”⁹⁶ Bret Holman has identified a turning away from *laissez-faire* and a tendency towards collectivism and compulsion after the First World War.⁹⁷ Malcolm Muggeridge observed that the assumption of the 1930s was “that the capitalist system is irretrievably doomed, and that some form of collectivist economy, whether or not called communist, is inescapable everywhere.” H.G. Wells's vision seemed to embody the age to both Muggeridge and Orwell.⁹⁸ Orwell asserted, “All sensible men for decades past have been substantially in agreement with what Mr. Wells says [...] [who is] probably right in assuming that a ‘reasonable,’ planned form of society, with scientists rather than witch-doctors in control, will prevail sooner or later.”⁹⁹

Orthodox liberal economic policies were largely intellectually discredited, except for a few intransigent holdouts like F.A. Hayek and Ernest Benn, and replaced by a broad consensus centered on Keynesian thought. While it is true that the British government still in some ways hewed to orthodox liberal economics concerning the gold standard and budget discipline, this does not mean that these policies reflected public opinion.¹⁰⁰ As Samuel Beer has argued, interwar governments still engaged in “state-controlled capitalism,” which required “large interventions in the economy.”¹⁰¹ The slipperiness of Keynesian thought appealed to both right and left, leading to a broad consensus about a “middle way” between a full-scale socialist economic model and free-market capitalism.¹⁰² The need for planning – a

⁹⁶ Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, *Britain in the 1930's* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 258.

⁹⁷ Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, 114.

⁹⁸ Muggeridge, *The Thirties*, 15, 40.

⁹⁹ Orwell, “Wells, Hitler and the World State,” 142.

¹⁰⁰ Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, 48.

¹⁰¹ Samuel Beer, *British Politics in the Collectivist Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 91.

¹⁰² Daniel Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning: The Debate on Economic Planning in Britain in the 1930s*

need universally admitted by air power enthusiasts and scaremongers – had, according to Richard Overy, become “an evident necessity” in the public mind.¹⁰³ The ideological packaging that determined the nature of air power discourse meshed better with contemporaneous political concerns. The air power enthusiasm of the 1930s was not some phenomenon emanating from the fringes of the political spectrum; instead, its popularity, in some measure, indicates a consensus concerning modernity that spanned the gulf between the left and right and reflected the hollowing out of classical liberalism.

Classical liberalism inoculated people against the most grandiose views of the potential of air power. Scholars have neglected this connection, because they have underestimated the decline of fin-de-siècle liberalism. It should be no surprise that the era that witnessed the Royal Navy's eclipse as the premier armed service coincided with the transformation and precipitous decline of classical liberalism. Edgerton showed how air power appealed to the far right while matching up with Britain's tradition of liberal militarism. My research suggests the special appeal of air power to those who opposed classical liberalism on either side. Waqar Zaidi echoes Edgerton's arguments about aviation's appeal to a “liberal Britain” interested in collective security and the international control of aviation. Like Edgerton, Zaidi overlooks the liberalism of those who remained skeptical of the “transformative powers” of aviation.¹⁰⁴ Bret Holman, on the other hand, has suggested that “[B]elief in the knock-out blow theory was largely non-ideological in nature.”¹⁰⁵ Barry

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 2, 337.

¹⁰³ Overy, *The Twilight Years*, 76, 89.

¹⁰⁴ Waqar Zaidi, ““Aviation Will Either Destroy or Save Our Civilization”: Proposals for the International Control of Aviation, 1920-1945,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, No. 1 (January 2011), 152-153, 155.

¹⁰⁵ Holman, *The Next War in the Air*, 86.

Powers found that “[T]he air scare could – and did – bridge all positions in the British social and political spectrum.”¹⁰⁶ Holman and Powers are right in noting the widespread nature of these beliefs, but this does not mean these beliefs were non-ideological; rather, it means that the ideology that precluded such enthusiasm had become rare. It is hard to find observers at the time not swept up by the fear or hope generated by aircraft, but this is more indicative of classical liberalism's decline than the non-ideological nature of air power.

The views of those who advocated for greater support of one of the three military branches involved more than just an objective assessment of strategic military needs based on technical criteria or their interpretations of the First World War. Their arguments also contained certain assumptions about the role of the state and Britain's national past and future. Navalists found themselves constrained by an inherited discourse that bound the Royal Navy to liberalism, trade, and the political culture of an earlier time. The British Army's advocates found themselves limited by the service's emphasis on continuity and tradition in its pageantry after the Great War. They could provide a glorious vision of the distant past, but could do little to furnish an equally convincing vision of the Army's role in the near future. Air power enthusiasts, on the other hand, shared a discourse that focused on the need for social discipline and the obsolescence of traditional British customs, while also glorifying the heroic, individualistic aviator. Air power rhetoric spanned the individualist and collectivist strains of British political culture. This enabled it to captivate public opinion to a degree that far outstripped strategic reality, which opened the way for the Royal Air Force to supplant the Royal Navy as the nation's premier service by the end of the 1930s.

¹⁰⁶ Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 133.

Public Perception of Air Power and British Defense Policy.

The extent to which public opinion shaped government decisions on issues related to defense is, of course, contested. Robert Shay has argued that the decision to make the RAF the centerpiece of rearmament “was by no means based on simply strategic considerations. They appear in fact to have been of secondary importance.” Decision-makers instead reacted to “public concern and fear about the effects of bombing and the threat of the “knockout” blow;” a fear the RAF stoked, intentionally or not, at Hendon.¹⁰⁷ Financial considerations also confronted Whitehall and military spending decisions reflected this mixture of financial stinginess and a desire to reassure and assuage public opinion. As rearmament began in earnest in 1934, the Defence Requirements Committee explained its rationale: “Government have deemed it their first duty . . . to make a large increase in the R.A.F., partly as a deterrent to Germany and partly in order to secure a more rational state of public opinion.”¹⁰⁸ Stanley Baldwin admitted that “the semi-panic conditions” about air power deeply influenced government decisions on rearmament.¹⁰⁹ David Reynolds has suggested “public attitudes significantly shaped British rearmament from 1934, helping to boost the RAF bomber force at the expense of the other services, especially the Army.”¹¹⁰ By the time of the Inskip Report in 1937, however, the cost-saving abilities of a bomber deterrent began to look more suspect and the penny-pinching logic of the Treasury turned to the much cheaper fighter plane in pursuing aerial parity with Germany. Thus, the defensive capabilities the Chamberlain

¹⁰⁷ Shay, *British Rearmament*, 90-91.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 54.

¹⁰⁹ Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth-Century*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, 117-118.

ministry built emerged, as Shay has argued, “not out of concern for the adequacy of Britain's military preparations, but out of concern about the effect that the increasing cost of those preparations would have on the economy.”¹¹¹ The RAF that stood “alone” against Fascist aggression in 1940-1941 was a product of compromise or, one might say, “muddling through.”¹¹²

Fear of the bomber played a pivotal role in shaping the appeasement policies of the Chamberlain ministry. “Under the spell of bomber-funk and military weakness,” Correlli Barnett has argued, the British government “bartered a fine Czech army in exchange for Hitler's promises of goodwill.”¹¹³ Much of this fear, as Tami Davis Biddle has done so well to argue, arose out of a type of projection. The British had an untested and exaggerated view of the capabilities of the bomber and they projected these assumptions onto a *Luftwaffe* that did little to play down its own might.¹¹⁴ This also suggests the very different roles military propaganda played in totalitarian and democratic societies. The Nazi party's national propaganda “attempted to draw the people into active participation in the national mystique through rites and festivals, myths and symbols which gave a concrete expression to the general will.”¹¹⁵ Military propaganda in Nazi Germany, on the other hand, was merely “annexed to the national cult.” The lack of popular participation in military parades made them incapable of instilling the sense of self-worship necessary in this cult. Even the

¹¹¹ Shay, *British Rearmament*, 172-173, 286.

¹¹² Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 23-26. Edgerton points out that the “alone” myth was a post-war creation. During the war, the more standard image was Britain as the forward base of an empire, rather than an island nation.

¹¹³ Barnett, *Britain and Her Army*, 423.

¹¹⁴ Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, 127; Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century*, 110.

¹¹⁵ Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, 2.

Luftwaffe, the military service most closely associated with the Nazi Party because of its lack of history, could not breach this divide between civilian and pilot. Nazi military propaganda instead focused squarely on the display of strength to impress foreign and domestic audiences. “People's Flying Day,” held at Tempelhof Aerodrome, sought to instill “air-mindedness” in the German public. “The inhabitants of Berlin,” the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* noted, “were constantly reminded of their possession of an air force by the droning of military machines from morning to night.”¹¹⁶ The Nazis had a much simpler project when it came to military propaganda. They did not have to worry about making a profit, avoiding charges of “militarism,” or convincing taxpayers of their air force's need for funding. These considerations only exist in a democracy. As Claudio Segrè notes in his biography of Italo Balbo, Air Marshal of the *Regia Aeronautica Italiana*, “In a dictatorship, however, the public's lack of air-mindedness and the inter-service rivalries could have been overcome in the *Aeronautica's* favor.”¹¹⁷ The displays of the *Regia Aeronautica* or the *Luftwaffe*, unlike those of the British armed services, did not need to win public approval by striking a balanced tone consistent with the values and interests of their respective populations. The armed forces in Britain engaged with the public more freely on their own terms, but they were also forced to convince the public and the government for support. The dictatorship's armed forces only had to convince the governing regime to achieve this support.

The day before the RAF Display in 1933, Hitler ordered the mass dropping of leaflets

¹¹⁶ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, April 23, 1935.

¹¹⁷ Claudio Segrè, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 160.

warning the people of Berlin of how exposed they were to aerial bombing.¹¹⁸ Such blatant domestic fear-mongering was, of course, less feasible in Great Britain. The RAF also possessed distinctively self-interested reasons to not pose as an instrument of foreign intimidation.¹¹⁹ After all, in doing so, the RAF might have undermined its claims for greater funding. Even if the RAF had been powerful enough to overawe foreign observers, it seems unlikely that it would have ever been used for such a purpose considering the political conditions in Britain for most of the interwar period. This is in direct contrast to the *Luftwaffe*, which consistently succeeded in impressing foreign observers with its “shop-window” aerial fleet. An observer in the *Gloucestershire Echo* commented that the review of the *Luftwaffe* at Nuremberg in 1935 was far more impressive than Hendon and Aldershot.¹²⁰ A German officer on the German General Staff in England offered information about German war plans and advised that in order to “avoid an underestimation [on the part of Hitler] which might have serious consequences we [should] propose dropping the customary practice of not revealing our [the British] hand.”¹²¹ British propaganda had not succeeded in delivering to the Germans a message of aerial strength. Domestic viewers of the RAF Display and Empire Air Day typically came away impressed, but the same cannot be said for experts who compared these displays to those of other air forces. The *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* admitted that the French air display at Villacoublay in 1937 “was even

¹¹⁸ *Daily Herald*, June 24, 1933.

¹¹⁹ On the other hand, the RAF did make an effort to awe non-European leaders and imperial subjects. The RAF provided the Sultan of Muscat and the King of Afghanistan with private showings at Hendon in 1928.

¹²⁰ *Gloucestershire Echo*, October 8, 1935.

¹²¹ AIR 19/60.

more spectacular than Hendon” from “several points of view.”¹²²

As Elizabeth Kier argues, “civilians interpret military policy according to how it influences power politics at the domestic level” and “culture has an independent causal role in the formation of preferences” for these civilian leaders.¹²³ The broader culture defined the parameters of government decisions concerning military doctrine. The electorate, it is true, rarely decided the fates of governments in this period. As Edgerton has noted, the formation of the National government coalition in 1931, for example, “involved no electors, nor did its transformation into the Churchill coalition including the Labour Party in 1940.”¹²⁴ Political leaders, however, still recognized the need to pay attention to popular opinion.¹²⁵ The cinema, radio, and print media all helped to distribute and magnify accounts of military propaganda beyond the audiences in attendance. Newspapers from all over the U.K. devoted article after article to military displays and addressed related issues more broadly. The BBC regularly provided radio broadcasts of the more popular military displays. An issue of *Sight and Sound* published in 1933 worried that cinema lent itself especially well to military spectacle: “A particularly distressing feature of recent newsreel has been the increasing volume of military subjects. It is far easier to send a cameraman to shoot a military parade. Militarists are good showmen and the Army is constantly parading.”¹²⁶ Military displays undoubtedly contributed to public discussion about the merits of each branch of the military.

¹²² *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, July 19, 1937.

¹²³ Kier, *Imagining War*, 3, 5.

¹²⁴ Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 35-36.

¹²⁵ Kyba, *Covenants without the Sword*, 3, 197. In an act of political leadership, Kyba argues, the government decided to go ahead with rearmament plans in 1934 despite believing it to be against public opinion.

¹²⁶ *Sight and Sound* (Fall 1933), 89-90. Film footage of the Aldershot Tattoo exposed many in Aberdeen to their first “talkie,” according to the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, June 18, 1929.

Conclusion.

The Royal Air Force surpassed the Royal Navy as the premier military service in terms of funding in 1938. The resources poured into the RAF during these years proved to be well spent, but the war that came turned out to be very different from the one most Britons expected. As Tami Davis Biddle has argued: “No revolution in warfare had yet taken place; the older forms of warfare were not yet obsolete. Indeed, the contrast could hardly have been sharper between what happened and what many had expected to happen.”¹²⁷ The Air Ministry expected 50,000 casualties within the first twenty-four hours of the declaration of war, or 50 casualties per ton of expended ordinance, one-third of them fatal.¹²⁸ In terms of casualties per ton, this proved to be a wild exaggeration. During the course of the war, actual figures were between 15-20 per ton of ordinance, one-third of them fatal. Just over 40,000 British civilians died during the entirety of the German bombing campaign.¹²⁹ As Philip Taylor has noted, “The pre-war perceptions of the bomber as a doomsday machine, with all the exaggerated calculations concerning the potential damage it could do to life, limb, property, and the fabric of British society, was far from the actual experience of the Blitz.”¹³⁰ The RAF Display and Empire Air Days contributed to the distortion of public opinion on the aerial threat. The RAF did not realistically portray the doctrine of counter-offensive bombing at either display. Instead, it proved more than willing to keep the fighter the centerpiece of its spectacle even after the buildup of the bomber fleet. The air displays undoubtedly increased the “air-

¹²⁷ Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 176.

¹²⁸ Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, 127.

¹²⁹ Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 123.

¹³⁰ Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century*, 111.

mindedness” of the public, but their emphasis on entertainment did little to promote a rational discourse about air power. In this regard, RAF air displays played the same role that the “naval theatre” played prior to the First World War. Jan Rüger argues: “The celebration of the navy had actively fostered public illusions about the nature of conflict. It had reflected the demands of stage directors and their audiences rather than an analysis of what war at sea would be like in the twentieth century.”¹³¹ A more realistic and effective portrayal of actual RAF aerial doctrine might have caused a public reassessment of air power. Thus, while RAF propaganda “succeeded” in the broader battle for creating public support, this support remained vague, which was perhaps the strength of RAF propaganda in the first place. Unlike the Royal Navy or British Army, the RAF presented itself as a blank canvas upon which interwar dreams and fears were painted. The Royal Navy and British Army produced propaganda in the “grand style;” rooted in time and place, constrained by the weight of history. Both vogue and vague, air power benefited from mirroring the broader political climate in Great Britain, which included the continued decline of classical liberalism. The vague presentation of air power to the public explains why this enthusiasm sustained itself for so long in an open-society with healthy political divisions.

In his book on German aviation in the interwar years, Peter Fritzsche provides a trenchant definition of what “air-mindedness” implied: “to be airminded in the 1930s was to understand the binary meanings of aviation: on the one hand, to comprehend and embrace all

¹³¹ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 255. In Part II, this dissertation argues that pre-WWI naval displays performed a different function than their post-war counterparts. This does not mean, however, that Rüger is wrong to argue for their distortive impact on pre-war expectations of naval warfare. The next Trafalgar never came, and the blockade that did so much to win the war did not form an important part of the “naval theatre.”

the newfangled possibilities and soaring achievements [. . .] but also, on the other hand, to soberly acknowledge the stern dangers that came with the air age and thus to support arming an air force.”¹³² The organizers of military displays had to find an appropriate balance among various binaries. The displays had to be entertaining, but not frivolous; dignifying, but not bellicose; inspiring confidence, but not complacency. Getting the balance wrong could diminish enthusiasm or convey a counter-productive message. After all, the displays were not mere exhibitions or popularity contests, but propagandistic tools in an inter-service war for more government funding. A popular display, if it did not promote such an end, would still be judged a failure. The RAF Display eventually produced the binary emotions Fritzsche described. By the late 1930s, the massive formations of bombers at Hendon elicited both awe and terror, simultaneously demonstrating both the strength of the RAF and its need for greater funding. Meanwhile, the fighters balanced the *frisson* of the bomber fleet with their aerobatics, entertaining the audience and humanizing the spectacle with the individual heroics of the aviator. Fritzsche's definition of “air-mindedness” evokes the idea of the sublime Edmund Burke explored:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect. No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear¹³³

¹³² Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers*, 218-219.

¹³³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2008), 39.

Bernhard Rieger has also referred to Burke's notion of the sublime in noting the mixture of astonishment, fear, and reverence elicited by large ships, aircraft, and other technological marvels in interwar Germany and Britain. Rieger argues that a German desire for change and a British desire to maintain the status quo shaped their views of technology.¹³⁴ In *relative* terms, Rieger's thesis is convincing. Aggrieved by the Treaty of Versailles, Germany in the interwar period was far less sated as a country than Britain, but what is more important is the basic phenomenon outlined by Rieger: modern technologies appealed to those who sought change, but this very ability produced ambivalence and anxiety. Aircraft, for the audiences at Britain's military displays, represented the ultimate modern military technology. As the Second World War approached, the sublime power of aircraft “entirely filled” many British minds at the expense of serious consideration of either the Royal Navy or British Army.

Perhaps the best way of judging a nation's assessment of its strategic priorities is to compare its pre-war spending to its spending after the first shots are fired and the real-time history of battle provides a clearer idea of strategic need.¹³⁵ As the Second World War dragged on, the Royal Navy's share of the overall military budget grew at a faster rate than the Army's and the RAF's.¹³⁶ Exaggerated views of air power's decisiveness – views the RAF's propaganda at air displays reinforced – nearly led the British to disaster.¹³⁷ British institutions mainly outside the Air Ministry nevertheless proved capable of adapting British strategy to conform to the new technologies, including radar and faster fighters, that emerged

¹³⁴ Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity*, 25.

¹³⁵ Bond and Murray, “The British Armed Forces, 1918-1939,” 124.

¹³⁶ Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, 179.

¹³⁷ Higham, *The Military Intellectuals in Britain*, 149.

in the late 1930s.¹³⁸ While Churchill might have won the day by mocking Sir Thomas Inskip's assessment of Britain's rearmament in the Commons in 1936, the Minister for Coordination of Defence played a decisive role in better orientating the British armed forces for the war to come. Perhaps Inskip, whom Churchill's friend Frederick Lindemann compared to Caligula's horse, had the last laugh after all.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, 209.

¹³⁹ Crowcroft, *The End is Nigh*, 78.

Epilogue

I grew up attending air shows with my father in California. While the crowds (including myself and my father) have gotten older, the shows themselves have remained frozen in time. Big Band and Swing music predictably fills the air. Oddly juxtaposed with modern jets, World War II iconography dominates the scene and World War II-era planes still feature prominently in the aerial displays. This dissertation starts off with an observation on air power's enduring power to capture the attention of observers, but the air show phenomenon seems to be long past its golden age of the 1920s and 1930s. Fewer and fewer air shows seem to mark the calendar each year in the United States and abroad.¹

The interwar era was not just the golden age for the air show, however, but for military displays in general. The Farnborough International Airshow, the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, the annual Trooping of the Colour, and the various ceremonies in honor of Remembrance Day represent some of the most prominent military displays in Britain today. Their popularity indicates that the British people have not lost all taste for military spectacle and the involvement of the armed forces in public ritual. The biennial Farnborough Airshow draws an average crowd of 200,000 over the seven days it is held and is the second-largest airshow in the world.² The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo attracts over 200,000 spectators every year across multiple shows as well. Unlike the interwar Aldershot Tattoo, however, the

¹ The Farnborough International Airshow, recently decided to abolish the public aerial display portion of the show starting in 2020. David Kaminski-Morrow, "Farnborough Air Show Axing Public Weekend from 2020," FlightGlobal, <https://www.flightglobal.com/farnborough-air-show-axing-public-weekend-from-2020/131701.article> (accessed July 31, 2020).

² The Farnborough Airshow rotates with the Paris Air Show, which is currently the largest air show in the world.

Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo remains an intimate affair with roughly 8,000 spectators crowded into stands erected in Edinburgh Castle's esplanade. These are notable events, to be sure, but the interwar RAF Air Display could attract up to 200,000 spectators on a single day and the Aldershot Tattoo regularly attracted audiences over 500,000 each year in the late 1930s.

These modern displays serve entirely different functions than their interwar counterparts. The RAF does not organize the Farnborough International Airshow, which is instead organized by Farnborough International Limited. Farnborough International Limited is in turn owned by ADS Group Limited, which describes itself as a “UK trade organisation representing the aerospace, defence, security and space sectors.”³ The Farnborough Airshow operates like a trade show rather than as RAF propaganda. The RAF Air Display included static displays of civilian aircraft and “new machines” at times, but the focus at Hendon was always on the aerial display of military aviation.⁴ Normally about half of the 200,000 people who attend Farnborough do so during the trade show portion of the event over the first five days. The grounds are closed off to the public entirely during this time. The RAF can show off its wares there, but so can any other country; indeed, the “international” component of both the Farnborough International Airshow and the Royal Edinburgh Tattoo distinguish them sharply from the more national interwar displays.⁵ While organized by the British

³ “ADS Group Ltd,” Farnborough International, <https://www.farnboroughinternational.org/about-us/ads-group-ltd/> (accessed July 31, 2020).

⁴ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, May 1, 1929.

⁵ The official Farnborough International Airshow website even brags that 70% of the exhibitors at the 2018 show were from outside the UK. Farnborough International, <https://www.farnboroughairshow.com/> (accessed July 31, 2020).

Army, the program at the Royal Edinburgh Tattoo incorporates armies and performers from all over the world.⁶ The 2018 Farnborough Airshow public flying display included the Czech “Flying Bulls” aerobatic team, the Airbus A350-1000, a Spanish Harrier, and a Boeing 727 alongside a flypast of Lancasters, Spitfires, and Hurricanes.⁷

None of these modern displays involve the same sort of overt didacticism found at Navy Week, the Aldershot Tattoo, or the RAF Display. The Trooping of the Colour and Remembrance Day commemorations instill reverence for the monarch and for the nation, but neither represent interventions into a specific public debate over modern national defense strategy. The interwar displays all provided elements of pageantry that tied the past, the present, and the future together in order to convince the British public to support their respective service. This intention is notably absent in their modern counterparts. The program at the 1964 Royal Edinburgh Tattoo, for example, contained massed bands, a gymnastics display accompanied by music, and Scottish dancing. A program like this one relies upon the effects of color, movement, and music to create a mesmerizing spectacle. By all accounts, the Royal Edinburgh Tattoo succeeds in doing just that and has become one of the most significant events of the Edinburgh International Festival each August. Nothing, however, in this sample program involves what might be called story-telling in the same way that the Aldershot Tattoo engaged in thematic explorations of past and future wars. The Royal Edinburgh Tattoo employs a “Storyteller” responsible for putting together the show, but the

⁶ “History,” The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, <https://www.edintattoo.co.uk/history> (accessed July 31, 2020).

⁷ “Farnborough Airshow,” British Airshows, <https://britishairshows.com/farnborough-airshow> (accessed July 31, 2020).

programs are nevertheless incapable of producing the massive “set pieces” on display at Aldershot that sought to give spectators not just a view of the military but of war itself.

The RAF tried to resurrect the success of the interwar air displays at Hendon and elsewhere after the war. The Empire Air League sponsored the 1947 Blackpool Air League Display with Air Ministry cooperation, but the show turned out to be a financial failure. Although 85,000 people attended, the show still lost £7,000.⁸ The Air Ministry assumed, based on the interwar experience, that a good show would bring in a profit, but conditions had clearly changed.⁹ The Admiralty, for example, showed little enthusiasm in cooperating with the other branches in putting on a display in 1949. The National Service Act of 1948 removed the need to compete for unskilled recruits. From the Admiralty's perspective, displays would do nothing, however, to solve the need for highly skilled sailors.¹⁰ There is no reason to think that the other two services did not make similar assumptions. The RAF continued to participate in air shows, but post-war air shows have never recaptured the popularity and cultural significance of those at Hendon in the interwar years. In a letter to the editor in the *Portsmouth Evening News* in 1938, a Portsmouth resident admitted his love for Navy Week and associated his enjoyment with his awareness that “Britannia still rules the waves.” For some, enjoyment of military displays required actual power underlying such displays. After the Second World War, Britain clearly no longer ruled the waves and, as its Empire unraveled, increasingly ruled much less of the world as well. Post-war military displays appealed to a much smaller public that shared a particular interest in military

⁸ ADM 1/20950

⁹ BT 217/1310

¹⁰ WO 258/108.

matters.

The 1957 White Paper on Defence reasserted the Royal Navy's role in Britain's defense scheme while raising questions about the need for the RAF in the rocket age. The RAF, of course, did more than simply survive this period of questioning, but the post-war history of inter-service rivalry did not reproduce the pre-war trend of the Royal Navy's relative decline. The military displays of the interwar period contributed to and confronted an “air-minded” public, but the RAF's time as the undisputed premier military service in the hearts and minds of the British public was impermanent. Perception of the armed services changed once more after the Second World War. Google's ngram tool produces a graph showing that use of the term “air power” jumped far ahead of “naval power” between 1934 and 1942. In subsequent decades, the two terms moved closer together. The phrases “Royal Air Force” and “Royal Navy” produce a graph showing that “Royal Air Force” was more commonly found in published material for almost the first five decades of the RAF's existence.¹¹ Reaching a post-war peak in 1955, however, the RAF's popularity went into a steep decline over the following decade while the Royal Navy's decline remained steady. By 1963, “Royal Navy” became the more popular phrase once more and this trend has remained unchanged.

1956 produced the Suez Crisis, which represents to some observers the end of Britain's pretense to super-power status.¹² Maybe at that point, with the American nuclear umbrella shielding them from above and the pressures of super-power responsibilities

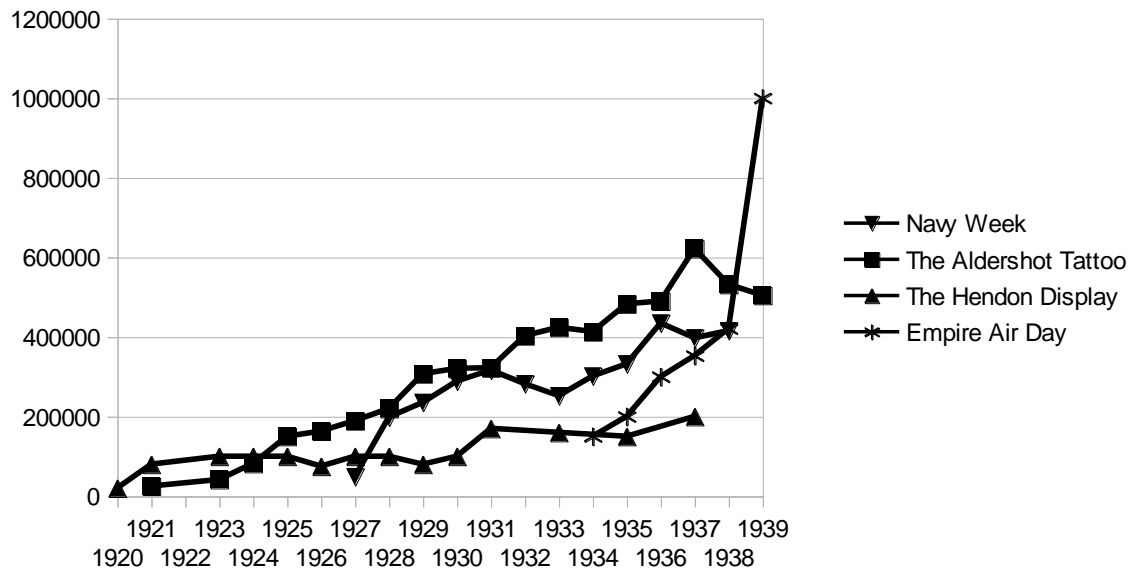
¹¹ Both graphs are included in the Appendix.

¹² Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, 277.

alleviated, the British were able to simply find comfort in nostalgia for the Royal Navy. By then, the political implications of support for a particular branch of the military had lost their interwar meaning. The Royal Navy and the RAF both justified their importance by pointing to their potential value as delivery systems for nuclear weapons. The choice between limited and total war, between the “liberal” vision of war Liddell-Hart favored and Clausewitz's grim vision of war's tendency to reach totality inevitably still existed, but the debate could no longer use the choice between naval power and air power as stand-ins for each position.

Appendix

1. Graph of Attendance at Major Military Displays, 1920-1939.¹

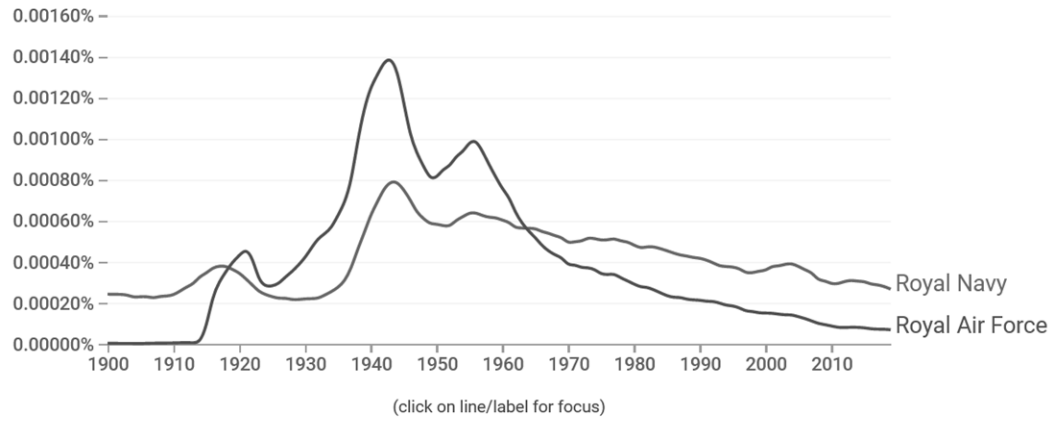


2. Google ngram of “Royal Navy” and “Royal Air Force,” 1900-2019.²

¹ Figures compiled and corroborated using numerous sources, including the following newspapers and journals: *The Scotsman*, *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, *Hendon and Finchley Times*, *The Air Review*, *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, *Gloucester Journal*, *Gloucester Citizen*, *Dover Express*, *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, *The Times*, *Western Morning News*, *Hampshire Telegraph*, *Portsmouth Evening News*, *Hampshire Telegraph*, *Reading Observer*, *Acton Gazette*, *Shepton Mallet Journal*, and *Staffordshire Sentinel*.

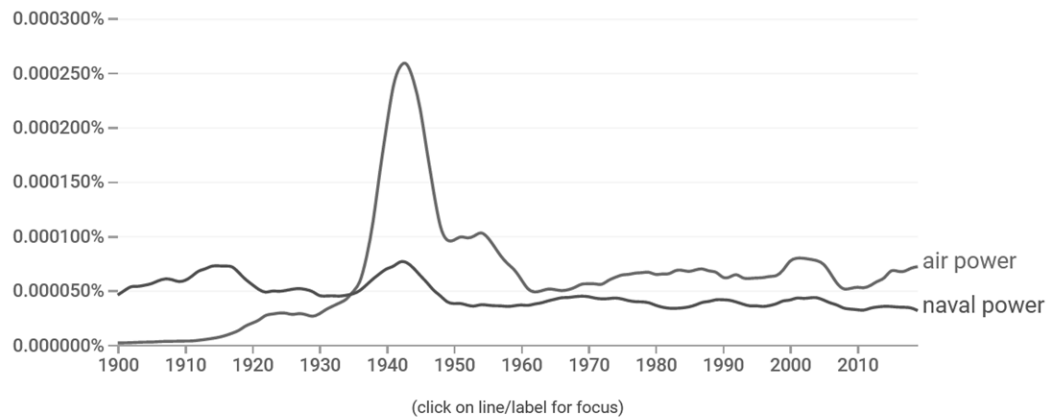
² <https://books.google.com/ngrams>.

1900 - 2019 ▾ British English (2019) ▾ Case-Insensitive Smoothing ▾



3. Google ngram of “air power” and “naval power.”³

1900 - 2019 ▾ British English (2019) ▾ Case-Insensitive Smoothing ▾



³ Ibid.

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