The Naval Historian and His Sources

By JAMES M. MERRILL

University of Delaware

AMERICAN naval history as a formal field of research and writing is of relatively recent origin. Its beginnings reach back into the 19th century with the works of James Fenimore Cooper, and it was given a tremendous boost by the writings of Capt. Alfred Thayer Mahan at the turn of the century. Since then interest in naval history has spread, especially since World War II, until today more scholars than ever before are engaged in active research.

Naval history, however, was slow to develop as an academic field. The hallowed tradition of the late 19th century and early 20th century was that naval history should be written by officers, ex-officers, or civilians closely connected with the service. This type of naval literature, although a pioneering effort, left much to be desired.

The glamour of naval operations, the heroics of battle, and the thrill of escapes at sea enthralled a generation of readers. The public's image of the United States Navy was molded in large part by writers whose personal tastes dictated the choice of events around which they wove their stories.

Mercifully, during the 1920's, authors of American naval history ceased to consider their field as merely a branch of literature and attempted to write "scientific history." Naval officers and a handful of academicians trained in the scientific method sought to make generalizations. They depended primarily upon their own ingenuity for gathering materials, and the quality of their work depended upon their training and initiative. Their search for objectivity sometimes hampered their pursuit of broad inferences.

A corner was turned in 1933 when James Phinney Baxter III published *The Introduction of the Ironclad Warship* (Cambridge, 1933). This book was a wonderful stimulus to scholarship. The time had come, historians realized, to explore areas other than operations, and they began preparing the way for the development of formal naval history.

The most significant of these general works was the two-volume survey by Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776–1918* (Princeton, 1939) and *Toward a New Order of Sea Power: American Naval Policy and the World Scene* (Princeton, 1940). While the Sprouts were probing the political aspects of the United States Navy, Bernard Brodie in his *Sea Power in the Machine Age* (Princeton, 1941) was concerned with the effects of the Industrial Revolution on the changing balance of sea power.

The author is professor of history at the University of Delaware, Newark, Del.

Shortly after World War II a younger generation of naval historians broke new ground. From them came a fresh flow of monographic studies based on solid and exhaustive research in the manuscript sources. Articles on naval subjects began to appear with greater frequency in the learned journals, indicating that naval history had become a recognized area of investigation. Besides the academicians, reputable freelancers such as Walter Lord began publishing superior books about the Navy.

The range of inquiry has become much wider and inquiries more sharply focused. The field has a bibliography, Robert G. Albion's *Naval & Maritime History, Annotated Bibliography* (Mystic, Conn., 1961) and its supplements; and several journals, especially the *United States Naval Institute Proceedings,* the *American Neptune,* and *Military Affairs,* seek and publish first-rate material on the Navy. Historical societies continue to print their share of naval articles in their journals, and the *American Historical Review,* the *Journal of Southern History,* and the *Journal of American History* have not lagged in publishing contributions. Universities and colleges are now offering courses in naval and maritime history; and every summer at Mystic, Conn., the Frank C. Munson Memorial Institute, in cooperation with the University of Connecticut, holds seminars for graduate and undergraduate students in the development of American shipping from Colonial times and its relationship to American political and economic history.

Yet the field of American naval history is still expanding. In comparison with the crowded shelves of western, southern, intellectual, social, and diplomatic history, naval studies seem to be merely beginning, not yet in a middle stage of development. Badly needed are not only specialized studies of shipbuilding, ordnance, communications, intelligence, and engineering, but also overall histories of naval administration and fleets. Other subjects worthy of investigation by historians are naval justice, medicine, and recruitment. Then, too, except for the Mexican War and Samuel Eliot Morison's biography of Matthew C. Perry, little has been published about the Navy in its formative years, 1815–60.[1]

The naval historian today must not only be acquainted with the sources of history and of the Navy but also be in a position to evaluate his sources critically and to correct the mistakes that crept into the literature during the 1910's and 1920's. Errors of judgment reflect old preconceptions, popular beliefs, and uncritical views, held by many of the earlier writers, which no one cared to check. To some degree the historical investigation of the United States Navy was hampered by erroneous views, which were taken on faith by some of the writers who came later.

To counteract these errors and to evaluate the Navy critically, scholars

[1] Samuel Eliot Morison, *'Old Bruin': Commodore Matthew C. Perry . . .* (Boston, 1967). For Morison's remarks on what still needs to be investigated by naval scholars, see the Marine Historical Association, *Untapped Sources and Research Opportunities in the Field of American Maritime History: a Symposium Held at the G. W. Blunt White Library, October 8, 1966,* p. 123–124 (Mystic, Conn., 1967).

must search the records. For years they have utilized the National Archives. Despite the efforts of the Archives to direct their attention to the rich rewards awaiting those who scrutinize the material in other record groups, naval historians continue to tap the great reservoir of documents in Record Group 45, the Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library. This group embraces the records of the Board of Navy Commissioners (1815–42), Offices and Bureaus (1799–1911), Naval Shore Establishments (1814–1911), Boards and Commissions (1837–1902), and the Office of the Secretary of the Navy (1775–1913). Especially valuable in this last series are the Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy, which are classified under "Officers' Letters," "Commanders' Letters," "Captains' Letters," and "Squadron Letters." These reports summarize the activities of the various commands at sea. Many of these official letters contain information of high value, detailing the economic and political developments occurring in the areas where the ships anchored. Perhaps the least consulted, yet one of the most revealing sets of papers in the records of the Office of the Secretary of the Navy is the Legal Records (1807–76), including courts martial and courts of inquiry.[2]

Included in RG 45 is material acquired from sources outside the Navy Department. One of the more valuable series consists of originals and transcripts of logs, journals, and diaries of officers of the United States Navy, some of which are richly illustrated by water-color and pen-and-ink sketches of ships and harbors. Also significant in RG 45 are the "Area" and "Subject" files, containing unbound papers gathered from private sources.

If the historian's work is to have merit, he must treat his topic broadly and relate developments to the society of which the Navy is a part. There are in the Archives less familiar but exceedingly important record groups that the scholar must research—Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (RG 52), Bureau of Yards and Docks (RG 71), Bureau of Ordnance (RG 74), Hydrographic Office (RG 37), Bureau of Naval Personnel (RG 24), and Bureau of Ships (RG 19).[3]

The other large depository of naval documents in Washington, D.C., is the Naval History Division, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Navy Department. Fortunately, like the National Archives, the Naval History Division sees value in scholarly, well-written work and has made

[2] These and other legal functions of the Office of the Secretary of the Navy were transferred to the Office of the Judge Advocate in 1880, RG 125. The records of the general courts martial and courts of inquiry (197 rolls) are included in The National Archives Microfilm Publications, as are other materials in RG 45. For a complete list of microfilm relating to the Navy see *List of National Archives Microfilm Publications, 1968,* p. 54–58. For a detailed list of the materials to be found in RG 45, consult *Guide to the Records in the National Archives,* p. 158–165 (Washington, 1948). Also see Bess Glenn, "Navy Department Records in the National Archives," in *Military Affairs,* 7:247–253 (Winter 1943).

[3] See National Archives, *Preliminary Inventories* Nos. 6, 10, 33, 123, 133.

sure that the researcher has access to all the necessary records and illustrative material.

Large in scope is the Naval History Division's ambitious and noteworthy project of publishing *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*. Already three volumes have appeared, and the material is so abundant that the Division now anticipates that more than 30 volumes will eventually be published.

The Division is making an exhaustive search to collect throughout the country and the world, mostly in fascimile, every available scrap of primary material that illuminates the naval and maritime affairs of the American Revolution. The late William Bell Clark, who was editor of the project, and the Division's senior editorial staff (Rear Adm. Ernest McNeill Eller, USN, Ret.; Rear Adm. F. Kent Loomis, USN, Ret.; and William James Morgan, with their aides) have unearthed bodies of new manuscript materials in Canada and in the United States. State archives, historical societies, and private and public libraries have produced large groups of records. The mass of material in the Public Record Office and in other London depositories relative to the Revolution is being copied as are records in French archives and libraries. The Division also has over 300 rolls of microfilm of American newspapers of the 1770's and 1780's and a huge collection of political broadsides, cartoons, poems, songs, and posters from home and abroad. This material supplements and augments Clark's own half century of gathering transcripts, photostats, and microfilm from important collections.[4]

The Naval History Division also controls more than 3.5 million items consisting chiefly of operational plans, war diaries, action reports, and other operational records of the United States Navy during and following World War II, including the Korean conflict. Also included are 320 volumes of unpublished administrative narratives of various organizational units of the Naval Establishment during World War II.

The historian's patient search for relevant data, however, is by no means confined to the National Archives and the Naval History Division. There is deep interest in the personal papers of individuals who held top commands and, to a less degree, in the correspondence of their subordinates. Therefore the scholar must range widely, especially to the manuscript divisions of public and private libraries and historical societies. Only in this way can he expect to give his subject the proper scope and focus. If he can find such materials preserved and organized systematically, the difficulties of his research are decreased.

The greatest single source of personal papers is the nearly 400 boxes of the Naval Historical Foundation, which are on long-term deposit in

[4] See Admiral Eller's introduction and Mr. Clark's preface in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution,* 1:xi–xvii, xix–xxiv (Washington, 1964). An excellent summary of the materials in the Naval History Division is found in an unpublished paper, "A Study of the Primary Sources Relative to the United States Continental Navy, 1775–1785," by Maynard Pressley White, a graduate student at the University of Delaware.

the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Among the more significant groups of papers are those of Stephen Luce, Thomas Selfridge, David Dixon Porter, and Robert W. Shufeldt. Perhaps the most important in this collection for 19th-century naval history are the papers of John Rodgers, whose illustrious career in the United States Navy spanned 53 years, 1829–82. Twenty-six boxes contain his private and official correspondence, logbooks, notebooks, memoranda, newspaper clippings, and assorted miscellaneous material. Rodgers did not keep copies of his outgoing letters; his letters are originals, most of them addressed to members of his family. They effectively document the activity of a high-ranking naval officer who, over a period of decades, was immersed in nearly every kind of naval duty. Topics about which he wrote were many and varied and shed much light upon the Navy during a large part of the 19th century. During his years of service, the absence of censorship by the Navy permitted Rodgers to write his wife with frankness and candor, and he wrote her almost every day.

Important groups of papers in the Naval Historical Foundation are those of Washington Irving Chambers (1856–1934), a pioneer in naval aviation. Most of this correspondence can be roughly divided into two parts: first, the pre-1910 material is generally concerned with Chambers' naval career and activities as an officer both at sea and ashore; second, the post-1910 material deals primarily with Chambers' interest in the newly emerging field of naval aviation and his role as one of its leaders.[5]

Augmenting the Naval Historical Foundation collection, the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress abounds with the personal papers of naval officers and enlisted men. Some of the more significant groups are those of John Paul Jones, John Adolphus Bernard Dahlgren, George Dewey, David Dixon Porter, and Charles Wilkes. Papers of men who served as Secretary of the Navy include those of Gideon Welles, Charles Joseph Bonaparte, Josephus Daniels, William C. Whitney, and Benjamin Tracy. One delightful volume of letters, revealing the enlisted man's outlook, was written by Joseph Bloomfield Osborn to his family and sweetheart while he served aboard the *Vanderbilt* at sea during the Civil War.

The largest single group of officers' papers outside the Washington, D.C., area is in the Southern Historical Collection, the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.[6] Among the 42 different groups of naval manuscripts are extensive materials written by the Confederate officers James Barron, Franklin Buchanan, and John N. Maffitt.

The finest single collection of manuscripts for the 19th-century Navy

[5] Library of Congress, *Washington Irving Chambers; A Register of His Papers in the Library of Congress* (Washington, 1967).

[6] Rear Adm. John D. Hayes, USN, Ret., "The Papers of Naval Officers: Where Are They?" in *Military Affairs*, 20:102–103 (Summer 1956).

is the papers of Adm. Samuel Francis Du Pont and his wife, deposited in the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library in Greenville, Del. The correspondence fills 198 boxes. From the time Du Pont entered the United States Navy in 1815 until his death 50 years later, he wrote regularly to his family and friends, and his letters offer a vivid picture of life in the Old Navy. Just as valuable are the letters Du Pont received —letters from such naval officers as David Porter, William B. Shubrick, Robert F. Stockton, John Dahlgren, and a host of others. The topics cover politics, naval matters and legislation; Alexander Slidell Mackenzie and the *Somers* mutiny; Herman Melville and *White Jacket;* activities of the Light House Board; work of the Naval Efficiency Board; and secession and naval operations during the Civil War.[7]

The Main Library, Syracuse University, has acquired a fine collection of John Dahlgren papers to add to its increasing Manuscript Division. No naval officer enjoyed greater intimacy with President Lincoln or was held in higher esteem than John Dahlgren. His widow, Sarah Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, wrote her husband's biography, *Memoir of John A. Dahlgren* (New York, 1882). In preparing this book she not only used her personal reminiscences but also gathered together many of the Admiral's personal papers. The *Memoir* quotes from the diaries, but in abbreviated form, so that a vast amount of information about the United States Navy is left unpublished. The Dahlgren collection contains diaries, memoranda books, letters, and journals. There is a mass of manuscript material on naval ordnance (illustrated by Dahlgren's own drawings) and on operations in and around Charleston Harbor during the Civil War. In scope and significance the Admiral's diaries rank along with the more famous ones of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles.[8]

The manuscript collections of the Naval History Society, which were given to the New-York Historical Society in 1925, are of importance. The Naval History Section has a fine group of logbooks and journals, including the well-illustrated diary of Edward Y. McCauley, USN, who sailed with Commodore Matthew C. Perry to Japan in the 1850's. The section also contains the manuscript papers of Gustavus Conyngham, Casper H. Goodrich, Francis Gregory Dallas, John Ericsson, Henry A. Wise, and Samuel Dana Greene.[9] The most important collection for Civil War scholars is the papers of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secre-

[7] See Charles W. David's unpublished "Report on the Collection of du Pont Family Books and Papers Owned by Henry Francis du Pont of Winterthur . . . Longwood Library 1959." The preliminary inventory of the Samuel Francis Du Pont papers has been revised by the staff of the Eleutherian Mills Library, 1961–69. The library also has microfilm copies of many Civil War letters concerning Admiral Du Pont, the originals of which are in the New-York Historical Society and the Naval Historical Foundation, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

[8] "John Dahlgren," in Syracuse University Library, *Courier,* 4:13–17 (1965).

[9] *Survey of the Manuscript Collections in the New-York Historical Society,* p. 48–53 (New York, 1941).

tary of the Navy.[10] Fox was the recipient of a large and intimate correspondence, receiving private letters from hundreds of individuals in and out of the naval service. The officers' confidential letters to Fox, which reveal the difficulties and frustrations of fighting a war at sea, supplement their official communications to Secretary Welles. They regarded Fox as a friend on whom they could rely for moral support, and the younger officers especially knew him to be a man of open mind, interested in new developments of the machine age and eager to take advantage of them.

Other libraries possess valuable collections: the Massachusetts Historical Society, the papers of George Samuel Preble; Princeton University Library, James Forrestal; the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, John Rodgers; Maryland Historical Society, the Purviance family; Rhode Island Historical Society and the G. W. Blunt White Library (Mystic, Conn.), Silas Talbot; Naval War College, Stephen Luce and Alfred Thayer Mahan.

Manuscript holdings in eastern depositories are augmented by some valuable collections in the libraries of the Middle West and Pacific Coast. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin has 11 rolls of microfilm and 7 volumes of the personal papers of Adm. William D. Leahy. Housed in the Iowa State Department of Archives and History in Des Moines are the papers of Adm. George C. Remey, and more of this collection will be opened to researchers in 1970. The Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, Calif., has a fine group of Gideon Welles' letters.

These varied manuscript collections, as this article indicates, are scattered. To know the whereabouts of all important manuscripts is itself a considerable task. The libraries and museums which fringe on the Atlantic possess a concentration of journals and logbooks, but many local historical societies and public libraries have a few logbooks. For example David B. Tyler, when preparing his book on the Wilkes Expedition, discovered Wilkes' letters not only in the Library of Congress, but in the Kansas State Historical Society, the American Philosophical Society, the New York Public Library, the Science Museum Library (Boston), the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, and the United States National Museum. Letters and journals of Wilkes' officers and crew were located in 14 other repositories, including the Honolulu Mission Society.[11]

This illustrates the serious problem created by the diffusion of sources from which the historian must work. In tracking down the material the researcher is deeply indebted to Philip M. Hamer's *A Guide to*

[10] In 1918 Richard Wainwright and Robert Thompson edited and published about one quarter of the Fox papers in *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox* (New York, 1918).

[11] David B. Tyler, *The Wilkes Expedition: The First United States Exploring Expedition (1838–1842)* (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 421–423.

Archives and Manuscripts in the United States (New Haven, 1961) and the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*. Unless, however, naval historians themselves, with the help of archivists, curators, and librarians, compile some kind of comprehensive list for existing naval collections large and small; and unless they make a detailed search for others, masses of local records, letters, logbooks, journals, and oldtimers' recollections will be neglected and overlooked through simple ignorance.