

BOOK REVIEWS

PENN, G.: *H.M.S. Thunderer. The story of the Royal Naval Engineering College Keyham and Manadon*. Emsworth, K. Mason. 1984. 207pp. Price £12.95.

(reviewed by Admiral Sir William Pillar, G.B.E., K.C.B., C.Eng., F.I.Mech.E., F.I.Mar.E.)

H.M.S. Thunderer . . . is much more than a history of engineer officers' training in the Royal Navy. Written by Commander Geoffrey Penn, author of 'Up Funnel, Down Screw' and 'Snotty', it perforce touches on many matters important in the development of the Engineering Branch as a whole.

This piece is not so much a review, more an indulgence. The views expressed are of course my own; those of a retired officer!

In his acknowledgements at the start of this most interesting book, Cdr. Penn says: 'It is odd that engineers have so little awareness of their past'. I am not sure that I would wholly agree, even if Manadon does not yet have its own museum. And there would probably be others who would say that engineers are more concerned with the present and the future. But this sort of attitude can easily lead to our overlooking the lessons of the past; something, I am afraid, we often do, both in respect of organization and of training as well as in technical matters.

All these aspects, as they are related to H.M.S. *Thunderer*, Cdr. Penn covers admirably. If my own recollection of events at Manadon some forty odd years ago differs in one or two details from what he has written, I am quite prepared to put this down to the failing memory of this old man.

In many ways what Cdr. Penn has written is a history of the Engineering Branch, for Keyham and its precursors and Manadon cannot be looked at in isolation. They were and are an integral and highly important part of both the Branch and the Navy.

Inevitably, throughout the early chapters the position of the engineer in the service is an implicit part of the story. Cdr. Penn deals frankly but sensitively with the difficulties facing engineers who were unwelcome cuckoos in the naval nest. Even in my time things have changed substantially.

Not long after I joined Dartmouth as a Spécial Entry Cadet in 1942, a term-mate with whom I had become friendly asked me what I was going to specialize in. When I told him that I was an Engineer he exclaimed, genuinely shocked: 'An Engineer! My mother (his father was a captain) won't have Engineers in the house!'. I am glad to say that we remained friends though I never had an opportunity to find out whether his mother would have allowed me to cross her threshold. But the story is indicative of the attitudes which, quite apart from the supposed inherent disadvantages of the Selborne-Fisher scheme, helped to bring about its demise—'The Great Betrayal' it was called—in 1925. I found the chapter dealing with the 'Great Betrayal' a particularly interesting one.

Not long after the AFO ordering the removal of coloured distinction cloth was issued in 1955 I remember the Chief Engineer in Gibraltar Dockyard, Captain (later Rear-Admiral) Noel Clarke for whom I was then working, giving me his own trenchant views on 'The Great Betrayal'. A Selborne Fisher man himself, he said 'It took 7 years to get us to ship purple stripes and it was only completed when C-in-C Atlantic issued a direct order. I wonder how long it will take for people to remove them!' Tactfully I 'followed his movements' and three months later spent a slightly sad evening cutting and stitching.

It is perhaps easy for me—a particularly fortunate beneficiary of the GL—system to say that this time I believe successive First Sea Lords and Admiralty Boards have kept faith scrupulously with the policy laid down in AFO 1/56. It has been a story quite different from that of the way in which Fisher's broad-minded and far-reaching reforms were brought to nought.

There have been feelings that specializations other than seamen have not been getting their fair share of senior posts. 'When are the cowboys going to move over and let the professionals in?' asked one officer at a Manadon Conference a few years ago. The 'Senior Cowboy' present—a member of the Admiralty Board and one highly respected for his technical competence—gave, as I remember it, a very straightforward answer. Certainly none of us should forget the wealth of talent available in the Navy as a whole or the way in which some appointments must be limited to those with command and operational experience.

As for the rest, my experience of the reporting and promotion systems at various levels has long convinced me that they are as fair as such things can be. The work entailed in ensuring that they are so is enormous. For engineer officers the problem is to ensure that the better 'engineer', perhaps more valuable than others in an engineering role, is given his opportunity to show his wider potential.

As Cdr. Penn says in the chapter on post-war experiments; 'Certainly the Selborne-Fisher scheme had envisaged the command of ships at sea by engineer officers . . .'. He goes on to say: 'But with the increased complexity of modern warfare, few engineers would lay claim to command at sea'.

Maybe not, but I can well envisage one day engineer officers—especially WEs—occasionally being given commands even if this entails transferring to the seaman specialization subsequently. Didn't a pusser pass the *Perisher* a year or two ago? I know that that Senior Cowboy thought that commands should go to the best men available regardless of specialization.

One thing the Services seem to have done consistently well is to have invested wisely in real estate and few would deny that Manadon was a 'good buy'. But, of course, it was also a very good investment for the Navy. As Commander Penn makes clear, in a quite remarkable way the ghosts of Keyham and its spirit, both stemming from the earliest Engineer Students of the *Marlborough*, were transferred to Manadon. There is, as a result I think, a great sense of continuity about the place and because now so few naval officers spend much time together in large groups, the cohesiveness created at Manadon is, I believe, of enormous value to the Service as a whole. It always worries me therefore when I hear that the future of Manadon is being discussed. The cost of the place can readily be calculated but what value can be put on its effectiveness when so much that is intangible is so important. By virtue of the job it has to do, Defence—or many aspects of it at least—cannot be treated as a business whose success can be measured by defined criteria. Of course we must aim to do everything as economically as possible but this does not always mean as 'cheaply' as possible. And, because of the hysteresis of the system, mistakes made in the personnel and training fields can take a particularly long time to rectify. Meanwhile the effectiveness of the organization concerned can be drastically and, in the case of Defence, perhaps fatally reduced.

The book describes the numerous changes made in training schemes following the second world war (the old Long Course ran for some thirty years) and, although reasonably familiar with these, I found this section a bit 'sticky'. Nevertheless it did not detract from my enjoyment of the book as a whole.

The latest course now qualifies students for the B. Eng. degree—'a new award in line with the Finniston Report'. I hope that no one will think that naval engineer officers are incapable of taking the M. Eng. degree also recommended by Finniston but I fear that some, disregarding the naval requirement and the extra year required for M. Eng., may regard the B. Eng. as something for the less able. In my view Finniston streams people too early and mainly on the basis of academic attainment. Wrong!

The great value of Manadon, of course, is that it achieves creditable academic results whilst paying due attention to other training requirements and that it is all done in a reasonably relaxed naval atmosphere. The balance is a delicate one and may be different for each individual. The fact that a student's tutor is also his divisional officer obviously helps to achieve the best balance.

At the same time Manadon plays an important role in helping to make those who enter the Navy by other routes feel part of the team. They in turn, with their variety of backgrounds, bring much to the Branch and to the Service.

There is much else in Commander Penn's book which invites comment—he covers a lot of ground. He refers to the fine rugger played by the College in years past. I remember being told by a spectator after playing at Exeter that College rugger hadn't been the same since Cooper and Matters left. (As sub-lieutenants they played for England before the first World War! Cooper, a wing three-quarter, was the first man to jump over a full back as he came in for the tackle).

The sterling work done by 'students' and staff during the heavy bombing of Plymouth—work which gained enormous respect from the people of

Plymouth and the police—altered quite radically the relationships between the College and the City, for many had previously regarded those at the College as privileged and somewhat irresponsible young men.

And so on . . . A chapter on 'The Falklands and the Future' seems to me to give the proof of the pudding. Those of previous generations can only be proud of the achievements of the present and if Commander Penn uses this chapter as an illustration of the need to have regard for the past, he is right in that too.

In writing a book of this sort I would imagine that one of the main problems is deciding what to leave out, for there is an abundance of stories about Keyham and Manadon and the people—the characters—who moulded these places. Perhaps they do not merit a place in a serious history but they are important to an understanding of the affection so many of us feel for that amazing victorian pile at Keyham and the more rural Manadon. Who then is going to take on the recording of what people remember of Instructor Captains D'Arcy Lever and Clarkson—the quickest black-board cleaner in the business!—of Gander, Martinant, and Wilkinson who when I asked if I could leave early to play rugger said 'Bugger rugger, sit down'? Of Goulding who standing in the middle of a blackboard would transfer the chalk from left hand to right and carry on writing (I think he disliked exercise!)? Of Ernie Gardner and of dear Stan Kealey—one of the most Christian men I have ever known? Of Ken Dinham brought up by Ernie and Stan in the same spirit of service which motivated them and so many others—and who made the Manadon grounds what they are today? Stories of the Hutchings, the Teagues, the Blakes and Fosters? Who were they who at lunch one day halved one of Mr. Judd's 'figgy duffs' and saw it off between them without turning a hair?

Who holds the record for the number of potato croquettes eaten at a Guest Night? Fourteen I think, and he still looks quite slim! The Editor will pay £5 for the first correct answer. (Public funds are not involved so no one need have concern on that account).

And of course there were all the engineer officers who did so much for the College and the Branch. Many! But particularly perhaps Vice-Admiral Sir Frank Mason and Vice-Admiral Sir Louis Le Bailly and the many others who have gained the respect of their seamen colleagues. All these people are part of what the present has inherited from the past.

Enough of all this! Any more and the Editor will not have room to deal with the present and the future. If I have criticisms—of the photographs for instance (except the one which includes me) and the way in which they are distributed—they are minor ones. I enjoyed this book and being something of a sentimentalist found it evocative and therefore easy to read. But there is plenty in it, too, to make it something which all engineer officers should read even if they have not had the experience of trying to waken a Canadian sub-lieutenant—who had obviously had a good run ashore the previous night—on a freezing cold morning tramping from Nissen hut to Nissen hut. On waking he said, 'It's not the custom of the Service to shine light in the victim's eyes'. I seem to remember that there was not much sign that they were seeing very much!

VILLAR, Captain Roger: *Merchant Ships at War—The Falklands Experience*. London, Conway Maritime Press and Lloyds of London Press. 1984. 192pp. Price £9.50.

(reviewed by D. W. Chalmers, O.B.E., R.C.N.C.)

Although not a history in a chronological sense, *Merchant Ships at War* is a valuable reference work for the future as well as being a very readable book. It is about the ships, both STUFT and RFA, of Operation Corporate, not the people—not more than a dozen people are mentioned personally. But Captain Villar has written chapters on each type of ship, for example tankers, repair ships, and aircraft ferries, even down to individuals like the mooring vessel *Wimpey Seahorse*. Each chapter lists the ships involved in that category together with the problems of their conversion and operational use. Conversion included the fitting of RAS gear¹, aviation fuel systems², and fresh water plants³, in addition to structural modifications, the provision of extra accommodation, and the fitting of weapons and naval communications equipments. With inside knowledge one might criticize the odd point here and there, but overall it is an extremely objective and comprehensive report within the security limits which still exist.

As well as the ship chapters there are interesting sections on the planning of taking up ships from trade, and on the logistic and dockyard work. The whole is put in perspective by short historical chapters on the beginning and end of Operation Corporate. For someone who was involved in the operation the book will bring back many memories, as well as clarifying happenings that may have seemed inexplicable at the time, when one had only a part view of the overall picture. It will also be valuable should we ever need to go through a similar operation again, as the many problems that were met with in converting and operating the wide variety of different ship types are listed and solutions briefly discussed. Appendices give summaries of the ships taken up from trade with their owners and dates, together with a brief history of the conversion and operation of each one.

Finally, looking to the future, Captain Villar re-emphasizes the dependence of the Royal Navy on the Merchant Navy in times of war and puts in a plea for much greater thought to be given to the design of merchant ships to ease their conversion to wartime roles of ever-increasing complexity.

References

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