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Introduction: The Royal Navy in Documentary

> Only to the degree that it has a core of reliable referentiality in its depictions can the documentary film be argued to be a key agency of modern public information.[1]

In late 2011, the Discovery Channel broadcast an eight-part documentary series filmed aboard the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*. The series had been recorded in 2010 during a lengthy overseas deployment, which had included port visits in the United States and multinational exercises in the Atlantic. While the voyage at the centre of the series represented highly appropriate televisual material, for its combination of fly-on-the-wall filming techniques used to follow individual members of the crew and infotainment-driven depictions of the ship's machinery and military hardware, political events on shore during the filming precipitated a tonal shift in the final programme's presentation, narration and reception. Before the deployment and filming had ended, it had been announced that as part of the coalition government's planned manpower and budget cuts to the Royal Navy entailed by the Strategic Defence and Security Review, *Ark Royal* (Figure i) would be decommissioned with immediate effect.[2]

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[1] John Corner, *The art of record: A critical introduction to documentary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.14.

[2] Ministry of Defence, Strategic Defence and Security Review published, 19 October 2010, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/strategic-defence-and-security-review-published--2 [accessed 1 February 2017].

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Figure i: HMS *Ark Royal*. LA(Phot) Stu Hill, 2010. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

The removal of the ship from service four years earlier than anticipated inevitably provoked widespread comment.[3] As a result, by the time of its transmission the series had become both a focus for the controversies provoked by the defence review in general and surrounding the alleged decline of the Navy in

[3] Anonymous, Defence review: Cameron unveils armed forces cuts, *BBC News*, 19 October 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11570593 [accessed 6 February 2017].

particular, and a televisual swansong for a ship the programme presented as the embodiment of the Senior Service in the eyes of the British public.

Advertisements for the series assumed an elegiac tone that combined the recognition of the national pride manifest in the ship with a melancholy perception of the country's apparently ebbing power with the passing of 'the *Ark*' into history (Figure ii). The trailer broadcast in the run-up to transmission featured a series of moving-camera shots tracking through parts of the ship's interior (control stations, instrument panels, machinery rooms and the ship's hangar deck), all poignantly depopulated. Accompanying these views of empty compartments was a layered soundtrack that juxtaposed the narrator's voice-over with excerpts of recorded orders and dialogue (deliberately altered with a post-production echo effect), and with selections from interviews with members of the crew:

> *Discovery* celebrates ('this is the best job in the world') more than just a ship ('everyone's heard of the *Ark Royal*' – 'there's definitely a sense of pride') … home to a thousand dedicated crew ('you live by pressure' – 'this is what we live for') … powerhouse of the Royal Navy ('just another day at the office') … guardian of the skies ('I mean, we're there to save people's lives' – 'it makes you realise the importance of this ship to the nation') … exclusive access to the final voyage of a national icon.

The trailer's potent combination of the voice-over's popularised version of establishment rhetoric (more than 'just a ship', *Ark Royal* is 'powerhouse', 'guardian' and 'national icon') and the understated heroism of the crew's comments endow its images of the deserted ship with a melancholy nostalgia crystallised in the final image. When the wandering camera emerges from a hatch onto the flight deck and pulls back to an artificially produced long shot, the ship is now revealed to be entombed and preserved in a bottle.

Because of the transformation in the ship's status during the period of the series' production, the tone and address of the trailer became characterised by complexities of lament and bitterness in place of a simpler and purer aura of tradition and nostalgia. The joltingly archaic rendition of the ship's appearance in the trailer (as a perfected computer-generated image located as an antique ship-in-a-bottle) came to encapsulate the paradoxes surrounding the series, the ship itself, and implicit presumptions about both the programme's subject and its inferred audience. While evincing (or perhaps attempting to assert) the relevance of the Navy to the contemporary world and viewer through its audio-visual eulogy to technology, training and tradition, the trailer also revealed and revelled in nostalgia and sentiment, in its unabashed declarations of the renown and iconic status of *Ark Royal*. For the television audience of 2011, the trailer affirms the ship's familiarity and significance, enshrined in a 25-year career including active service in the Mediterranean, Adriatic Sea and Arabian Gulf. However, the ship through her name referenced and recalled forebears stretching back to the time

Figure ii: HMS *Ark Royal* departs on her final deployment. LA(Phot) Alex Knott, 2013. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

Figure iii: HMS *Ark Royal* returns to Portsmouth for the last time. LA(Phot) Chris Mumby, 2010. Crown copyright: Open Government Licence.

of the Spanish Armada, in an unbroken line of service tradition, national history and (as the voice-over attests) common knowledge.

However, the trailer's assumption of a communal recognition and veneration of the ship and her name as epitome of the Navy actually implied, or perhaps actively sought to recall, a previous version of its principles, portrayal and programming in *Sailor* (BBC, 1976). This documentary series recorded a very similar overseas deployment by the previous HMS *Ark Royal*. Although controversial at the time for its untrammelled exposure of everyday life in the modern Navy, the series also became a focus for public sentiment and nostalgia. When the ship was retired in 1979, an unsuccessful public campaign was mounted to preserve *Ark Royal* as a museum.[4] An addendum to the series, *Sailor: 8 Years On* (BBC, 1984), not only interviewed serving and retired crew members from the original episodes but also included deliberately affecting scenes of the remains of the ship in the process of being scrapped. In 2011, the fifth and (to date) last *Ark Royal* (Figure iii) was the focus of similar, vain attempts to preserve the ship for the nation, in the wake of the Discovery Channel's series.

The deliberate and coincidental, textual and contextual similarities between these documentary series made 35 years apart underline the remarkable consistencies at work within the representation of the Royal Navy on British television.

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[4] Richard Johnstone-Bryden, *Britain's Greatest Warship: HMS Ark Royal IV* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), p.228.

While these documentary programmes appear to express (and exhort) keen senses of national pride in their subjects, they are also marked by overt emotion and nostalgia. Awareness and invocation of tradition are tinged with an aura of sentiment frequently descending into melancholy. This is not simply connected with the anthropomorphic investiture of ships with life, identity and history, or with a presumed, persistent public attachment: 'that jealous love the British have for their Royal Navy'.[5] The strong resemblance between the BBC's *Sailor* and Discovery's *Ark Royal* highlights the assumption or claim on the part of producers and broadcasters of the importance with which the Navy is regarded in public life in Britain. However, the contextual parallels and consequent tonal correspondence between the two series reveal an additional convergence: an abiding sense of the post-war Royal Navy as an institution at bay, endeavouring to explain its purpose and even justify its continued existence in a political-cultural moment in which its traditions, its history and its present incarnation of both appear increasingly anachronistic or irrelevant. In such a post-war era of alleged endemic 'sea-blindness' (in political as well as public circles), the visibility (especially the tele-visibility) of the Navy clearly assumes considerable significance. If the Navy's identity and purpose are open to question, so implicitly are fundamental aspects of post-imperial Britishness in national, international, ideological and cultural terms, and how these are depicted and defined in popular mass media.[6]

In examining the televisual representation of the Royal Navy, from its perceived heyday in the 1970s to a gradual return to frequent documentary treatments since 2000, this book addresses three inseparably related areas of consideration: the broadcast history of the Royal Navy as a subject of documentary, drama and documentary-drama programmes since the 1970s; the evolution of forms of documentary and factual television over this period of production in which naval representation has figured prominently and influentially; and the convergence of these analyses of both subject and textual form, in the formulations of Britishness (in terms of identifiable national realist aesthetics and in documentary treatments of national identity) coalescing in and emerging from the Navy's televisual representation. The varying 'referentiality' of depictions in documentary and drama over this period can be seen to function in both revelatory and coercive ways, to exhibit and explore the identity and purpose of the Navy as a discrete and distinguishable institution and community, which is nonetheless linked inseparably to the institutions and communities of the wider state. In this context, the 'public information', the

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[5] Caspar F. Goodrich, 'The Navy and Its Owners', *The North American Review*, 1921, 213(782), 25–35 (p.25).

[6] Jasper Gerard, Ministers accused of 'sea blindness' by Britain's most senior Royal Navy figure, *The Telegraph*, 12 June 2009, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/5517833/Ministers-accused-of-sea-blindness-by-Britains-most-senior-Royal-Navy-figure.html [accessed 9 September 2017].

'agency' of its documentation and the responsibility attendant on both its presentation and reception represent a conjunction of institutional, ideological and aesthetic priorities. Television documentaries on the Navy can represent programming based on Reithian principles of public service broadcasting, addressing and informing interested citizens and quizzical taxpayers to whom the armed services, the government and to an extent the broadcasters themselves are answerable. In this context, the presence, form and role of films publicising the Navy for the purposes of public information and recruitment can be seen to assume a pointed if not disproportionate significance.

A review of some of the films representing the Royal Navy in the post-war period made and circulated for the Ministry of Defence by the Central Office of Information helps to establish the imagistic, rhetorical and tonal consistencies of informational and recruitment materials. The characteristics of these films – and the public relations narrative they embody and construct – reflect both an introspective self-assessment and an outward-facing assertion of significance on the Navy's part. These films balance a reaffirmation of history and tradition with a declaration of continuing, contemporary relevance, to what is assumed alternately to be an indifferent and ignorant or patriotic and partisan public audience. Considering these films in detail allows the recognition and formulation of the ideological bases and representational strategies which television dramas and documentaries perpetuate in their later records and portrayals of the Royal Navy.

Following the end of World War II, numerous films made by the Central Office of Information (COI), the Ministry of Defence, and the Admiralty represented the Navy to the public in a variety of non-fiction forms, such as documentaries, public information films and recruitment materials. These films depict the Royal Navy in transition if not flux, as war-built vessels and wartime concepts are replaced by new ships and evolving operational requirements. As such these films represent the contradictions of continuing tradition and technological revolution that the service experienced in this period. They also exhibit enduring consistencies in the Navy's audio-visual portrayal, with attendant ideological significance, which connect films otherwise separated by time or form. The recurrence of familiar images of and immutable messages about the Navy reveals the existence of a common frame of historical and cultural reference (within documentary, public information or recruitment material) for British naval representation. This discernible commonality of representation in turn provides evidence of an ideological and imagistic cohesiveness, which has governed, informed, influenced and confirmed popular perceptions of the Royal Navy, up to and including its representation on television in the 21st century.

An early post-war documentary example is *The King's Navy* (Edward Eve, 1948), which portrays a navy ostensibly as unchanged by the coming of peace as it has been by six years of war. Observance of tradition is in fact celebrated as an institutional principle borne out by experience. Just as its title suggests an

unquestioned patriarchal authority, the film's images of the Navy are framed by familial and traditional imperatives. Accompanied by an authoritative voice-over, its observations of naval life are based upon ageless assumptions, obligations and notions of tradition and duty. Each distinct arm of the service is exemplified and embodied by a representative from a fictitious family with an historically relevant name: 'there's a member of the Blake family in nearly every kind of ship'. This organising principle facilitates the connection and familiarisation of the Navy's ships, roles and ranks. Appropriately, the film's paternalistic inspection of the Navy concludes with the reigning monarch reviewing 'his' fleet in a demonstration of personal and national pride.

At the centre of the film is a comparable patriarchal figure, 'Petty Officer Jim Blake', whose family members permeate the ranks. Jim's record of service introduces the varied types of ships to the audience: having served first on a destroyer, he progresses to duty aboard coastal craft, then a cruiser, and with subsequent promotions aboard a battleship and an aircraft carrier. Notably, the descriptions of these warship types are unaltered from pre-war or wartime concepts. The voice-over declares that the 'main purpose' of destroyers remains 'torpedo attack'; torpedo boats are still likened to early 20th-century 'mosquito craft'; cruisers must continue to 'patrol the trade routes to protect shipping'; and the battleship, not the carrier, is proclaimed to be the 'ultimate' manifestation of naval power, regardless of the lessons of World War II. Remarkably, the technological and tactical changes of the recent past (the pre-eminence of the carrier and the submarine, the introduction of radar and the advent of nuclear weapons) are not addressed at all in this review. The dearth of discernible change in the descriptions of ships' roles, and the lack of acknowledgement of the impending obsolescence of cruisers and battleships, epitomises the film's unremitting traditionalism. This treasuring of tradition is evident from the film's opening. The presence of HMS *Victory* in Portsmouth is said to inspire 'shades of Nelson' when Jim goes home on leave. The voice-over affirms that the history symbolised by Nelson's flagship still pervades the Navy: 'All officers and men of the Royal Naval Barracks, Portsmouth, are entered in the books of *Victory*.'

The film's combined discourses of duty and tradition are sustained through the sketches of other serving members of the Blake family: Jim's son George in training at HMS *Ganges*; his brother Robert working as an instructor at the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth; and another brother, Peter, in the ranks of the Royal Marines. A sequence illustrating commando training is followed by scenes of 'the miniature marines: the cadets', who are described as 'pocket editions of their fathers and grandfathers who were in the same branch of the senior service'.

This familial unity of service is matched by what is affirmed to be a parallel, unbroken historical continuity. Jim discharges what is stated to be the 'sailor-father's responsibilities' by taking his youngest son to the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, where they view a model of the HMS *Rawalpindi*, 'sunk

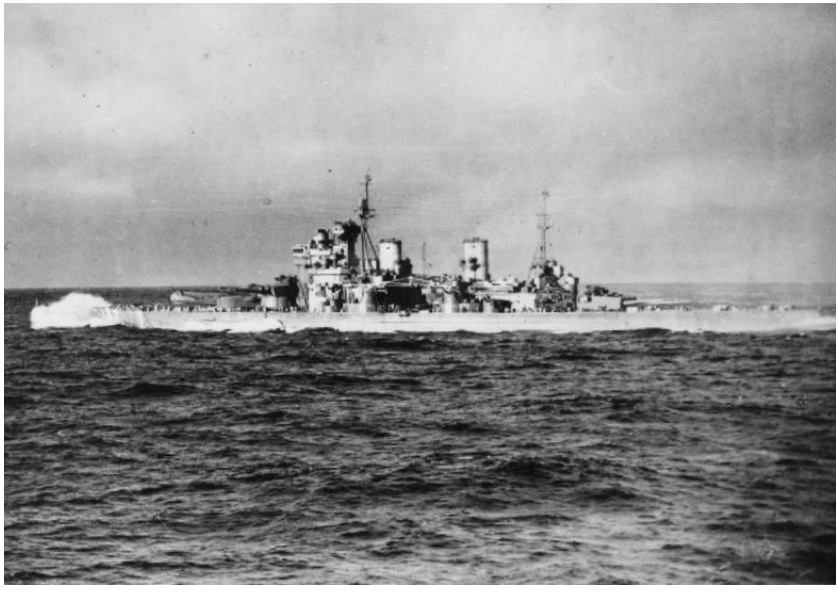

Figure iv: HMS *Duke of York* during World War II. 1942. RN official photographer, Parnall C H (Lt), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HMS_Duke_of_York_during_an_Arctic_convoy.jpg

off the Shetlands in the first year of the last war', and Nelson's uniforms on display. The omnipresence of naval history is re-emphasised as Jim buys a newspaper near Admiralty Arch and shows Ronnie the image of Drake's *Golden Hind* on the reverse of a halfpenny piece. This affirmation of tradition and paternal authority reaches its apogee in the final sequence, which records 'the most memorable of all peacetime naval occasions … when the King himself visits his fleet', to an accompaniment of 'Rule Britannia.' Here again it is the battleship (HMS *Duke of York*, the flagship of the Home Fleet, Figure iv) that symbolises 'the King's Navy'.

The elevation of tradition and the absence of change seen in *The King's Navy* belie the institutional and technological transformations that the post-war Navy was experiencing:

> British leaders had a firm understanding that their's [sic] was a maritime nation and that the Royal Navy was crucial to their security. Here, however, the problem was a financial one, in which the limited resources of a nation recovering from war were stretched to meet the post-war needs of an empire … The war's end prompted radical reductions in British military strength. Ships were removed from service, and were

> either retired, sold or transferred to other nations. The Navy Estimates for 1947–8 amounted to a 23 percent decrease from the previous year.[7]

Reflecting these circumstances both the *Duke of York* and the cruiser HMS *Diadem* depicted in *The King's Navy* were placed in reserve by 1950. Celebrating the Navy via its aura of institutional continuity, and elevating a heritage of service through the example of the Blake family as an admirable quality in itself, *The King's Navy* asserts an unyielding need for an unchanging Navy.[8]

The COI film *First Left Past Aden* (R. Compton Bennett, 1961) similarly obscures any alteration in the Navy in its representation despite (or arguably because of) its appearance after a particularly traumatic and transformative moment in post-war British history: the Suez Crisis.[9] The film constructs a curiously eulogising portrait of the Navy's global presence and its role in the Persian Gulf, depicting duties in far-flung regions not as the vestiges of empire but as essential, moral and national obligations:

> The system of British paramountcy [sic] in the Gulf has been seen by many as a relic of the days of gun-boat diplomacy that should have been one of the first of Britain's imperial holdings in Asia to disappear, not one of the last.[10]

Despite being made in the 1960s, this film's imagery and the poetic appeal of its voice-over (delivered by Michael Hordern) are as emblematic of previous decades as the World War II warship, HMS *Loch Lomond*, on which the narrative focuses.[11]

First Left Past Aden furnishes a sentimentalised record of day-to-day life during an extended deployment, as an isolated ship and crew patrol the Gulf and 'show the flag'. Crew members are shown to react sardonically to an officer's assertion of the importance of their task. The crew's duties and pastimes and the captain's burdens and responsibilities, shown in a montage, are simultaneously

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[7] Bruce W. Watson, *The Changing Face of the World's Navies: 1945 to the Present* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1991), pp.27–28, 49.

[8] The film's insistence on the maintenance of wartime vessels (especially battleships) for the continuation of wartime roles actually aligns closely with the Navy's plans and projections of this first post-war decade. See Eric Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident: British Naval Policy since World War II* (London: Bodley Head, 1987), pp.33–37, 55–56.

[9] Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident*, pp.198–201.

[10] J.C. Hurewitz, The Persian Gulf: British Withdrawal and Western Security, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1972, 401, 106–115, p.108.

[11] The deployment of outdated and unsuitable World War II-era ships to the Gulf in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in extremely uncomfortable and unhealthy conditions for crews: Iain Ballantyne, *Strike From the Sea: The Royal Navy and US Navy at War in the Middle East 1949-2003* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2004), pp.28–30, 35.

ironised and celebrated as the voice-over observes reverently: 'Her Majesty's Frigate *Loch Lomond* proceeds powerfully and peacefully on her journey down the Gulf.' The commentary champions the crew's unacknowledged sacrifice during the nine-month deployment, but evinces an Orientalist view of the region redolent of the days of empire:

> The Persian Gulf and Arabian seas: what mystic thoughts are conjured in the colourful magic of the name. Caliphs and kasbahs, jewelled scimitars flashing in the sun, tall mysterious minarets and crowded carpet-begging bazaars topple over each other in the confused jumble sale of our imagination. But what is it like, Jack? What is it really like?

Notably, this outdated and clichéd conception of the Middle East is combined with the similarly traditional labelling of the emblematic British sailor as 'Jack' (Tar). Mary Conley has shown how the sentimental and celebratory characterisation of 'Jack' as a shorthand for all sailors aligned 'naval manhood' with 'imperial manliness' within the construction of 'navy, empire and society' in Victorian Britain.[12] The evocation of 'Jack' in the voice-over is thus indicative of this film's unquestioned, traditional perspective. Yet this nostalgic validation is ironically undermined by a cut to a sailor in close-up, whose rejoinder answers the voice-over's rhetorical question: 'Flipping 'orrible, mate!' The film's romanticised images of service in the tropics are replaced by a montage of scenes of shipboard activity as *Loch Lomond* receives new orders. Despite the visual inculcation of a sense of purpose, the voice-over acknowledges the paradoxical mix of irritation, discomfort, homesickness, duty and national pride motivating the crew:

> There are few who choose this corner of the world, this super-heated cul-de-sac that lies first left past Aden. But here there is a job to do, and Jack has come to do it … now a plan of action has been unfurled and allowed to flutter in the minds of those who by their rank and station are entrusted with the ruling of the waves.

Dedication to the task is unequivocally expected, just as the responsibility as much as the right to 'rule the waves' is undisputed. Scenes in the engine room, the radar office and on the bridge and with the fo'c'sle party, accompanied by the voice-over, provide further commendation of the ship's and crew's commitment and purpose: 'They have learned to live with both the climate, and the boredom. There is a meeting point and this is where they meet.' As night falls and sailors are shown off duty, eating, and playing card games, the voice-over

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[12] Mary A. Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: Representing naval manhood in the British Empire, 1870–1918* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p.1 (see also Chapter 6).

continues to demand recognition of both their unenviable conditions and the uniqueness of their status as a community: 'Let no one think that it is easy to live so long in such close proximity. There is a code, a way of life, a certain understanding that allows each man to live apart, yet eat and sleep and dream as one, in this house of steel which Jack built.' 'Jack's' profession is portrayed and understood as at once fundamentally different to civilian life and yet familiar to a sympathetic British audience, which is also assumed to be instinctively aware of the traditions of the Navy. The film's record of both the crew's recreations (writing letters home, and a football match ashore) and professional duties balance the voice-over's combination of comic irony and heroic understatement:

> The duty has been done: a soothing gesture in the troubled world. The Mullah has been encouraged to express his aims, and in turn will receive the help and understanding of a government at home. But for Jack, who waits to see his homeland shore, it's just another day that's gone, thank God. A little bit of history has been written, but there was nobody to note it down.

Following the ship's diplomatic mission, when the captain suddenly 'becomes an ambassador', the officers and crew enjoy a period of brief relaxation ashore. The voice-over extolls the need for this lull in the patrol with a historical allusion to tolerance as much as tradition: 'We've said it before and we'll say it again: there is a meeting point, and Nelson with an understanding smile will turn his unseeing eye towards this, the only barbecue in a thousand ocean miles.' Next the frigate is redirected to search a suspicious vessel, a dhow that could be smuggling weapons, but even the mild apprehension this arouses dissipates when the boarding party finds only fish. Yet the inconsequentiality of this episode and the irony with which the entire patrol has been observed are subverted by the film's end. The voice-over and the previously heard sailor's voice converge again to assert the value of the unnoticed enterprise far from home:

> [voice-over] Behind this languid air of Jack there is a sense of purpose running deeply in his veins. Try telling him it's all a waste of time, and just listen to him erupt like some long extinct volcano …
>
> [sailor] Ruddy important, that's what it is, and I'll fill in the next bloke what says it ain't!

These final words exemplify *First Left Past Aden*'s ironic stance, alternately mocking the mundanity and ineffectuality of the Navy's role in the Gulf region and averring its tradition and significance. The film's centring on an anachronistic war-built ship and its adoption of the diction and doctrine of a pre-war documentary corroborate the perpetuation of the Navy's regional constabulary

role, within a contemporary geopolitical context belying their apparent incongruity: in the very year of the film's production, a massive British naval effort was required to safeguard the newly independent kingdom of Kuwait from a possible Iraqi invasion.[13] Like *The King's Navy, First Left Past Aden* appears to elide the passage of time or the transformation of the post-war and post-imperial world in its representation. The Navy's roles (and apparently the ships and sailors discharging them) continue to embody both the unity and endurance of wartime and imperial tradition of global presence and policing. The film recalls interwar poetic documentary examples, depicting underrepresented areas of the British Empire via liberal, educational observation. However, following this Griersonian precedent also appears to entail nostalgic and simplistic portrayals of class, culture and race.

The changes experienced by the Navy in the 1960s, though unseen in *First Left Past Aden*, become evident in films produced later in the decade. Even as the Navy commissioned its first nuclear attack and ballistic missile submarines, its relevance was questioned and its status undermined by cuts to its budget, reductions in the size of the surface fleet and the shrinking of the carrier force. At the same time the Navy's international deployments continued unabated, despite the ascendance of the 'East of Suez' policy, and government statements that a global naval presence would not be maintained and that overseas bases would be evacuated.[14] The official position of British withdrawal and the commitment of UK forces to NATO and Europe were contradicted by the maintained presence in former imperial territories and ongoing obligations to the Commonwealth. The Navy declined materially and reputationally even as it strove to justify its existence and identify a viable role:

> The Soviet naval build-up occupies only the attention of a few strategic experts and Conservative back-benchers; the fact that France will soon have – for the first time since 1779 – a larger navy than Britain will pass generally unnoticed. In this introspective age, when domestic, social and economic problems dominate the headlines, it would be considered anachronistic to dwell too much upon the condition of British sea power.[15]

Although this period is therefore characterised by uncertainty and rationalisation, *Fourteen Hundred Zulu* (Ian K. Barnes, 1965) chooses instead to

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[13] Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident*, pp.246–248.

[14] Watson, *The changing face of the world's navies*, pp.102–106. See also Michael Howard, Britain's strategic problem east of Suez, *International Affairs*, 1966, 42(2), 179–183.

[15] Paul M. Kennedy, *The rise and fall of British naval mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p.349.

emphasise both development and tradition.[16] Far-reaching and rapid technological changes overtaking the fleet are epitomised by the images of brand-new and updated ships. The film's review of the Navy's worldwide training and deterrent operations foregrounds its most modern guided-missile destroyers, frigates and nuclear submarines.

Following a credits sequence that shows a frigate undertaking replenishment at sea, and an aircraft carrier operating the latest Buccaneer bombers, succeeding scenes introduce a sombre tone.[17] Inspiring views of merchant ships and bustling harbours, buoyed by 'A Life on the Ocean Wave' rising on the soundtrack, are undermined by intrusion of a stolid voice-over, which invokes the recent experience of the Battle of the Atlantic and confronts Britain's economic dependence on maritime commerce:

> Every year Britain relies on ships for foreign trade worth £7000 million … Oceans cover three quarters of the earth's surface, and without ships Britain would starve to death in fourteen days. In times of peace, merchant vessels combat natural hazards: in times of war, they are the prime targets of the enemy.

An abrupt cut showing an empty lifebelt drifting in the surf concretises the reality of the country's vulnerability. The sudden appearance of this poignant image, redolent of the existential struggle against Germany's submarines in both world wars, rhetorically links the modern and wartime navies. The present-day Navy is still tasked with defending seaborne trade, yet, in the context of nuclear conflict, a convoy war lasting months or years might seem highly improbable.[18] Striving to depict and justify the Navy's Cold War role, *Fourteen Hundred Zulu* represents the modern fleet's new capabilities and global responsibilities, but also insists upon the Navy's relevance on the basis of the experience of the recent past (as in *The King's Navy*), and enduring service heritage (after *First Left Past Aden*).

From the first sequence a cross-fade shifts the focus to the Admiralty building in London, which is styled by the voice-over as the 'nerve-centre of the

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[16] *Fourteen Hundred Zulu* is listed as released in 1960 on the BFI Film and TV Database (http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/213131 [accessed 8 May 2007]) but the film catalogue of the Imperial War Museum dates its production to 1965. The array of ships and aircraft represented suggests the film must have been made later than 1960, and could have been shot as late as 1967.

[17] This aircraft carrier could be HMS *Eagle*, which featured in a contemporary film depicting the Fleet Air Arm, *The Buccaneers* (Ian K. Barnes, 1966), another produced by Drummer Films.

[18] Protection of merchant shipping by the Royal Navy after the pattern of World War II continued to influence naval strategy from the later 1940s into the 1970s. See Grove, *From Vanguard to Trident*, pp.33–34, 84, 108, 200.

navy … a magnet that attracts signals from every continent'. (This description in itself suggests the film's unapologetically traditional perspective, as it ignores the abolition of the Admiralty after almost 300 years, and the concentration of authority in the 'new' Ministry of Defence, in 1964.)[19] The commentary declares that from this headquarters 'the movements of four hundred ships and 100,000 men are controlled: at this moment, at any moment, the Navy's ships encompass the globe, from the Arctic Ocean to the Ross Sea'.[20] However, the range of locations listed on the maps glimpsed in the control room (and depicted in the course of the documentary) rather reflects the last vestiges of the Empire: 'HONG KONG – MALTA – ADEN – SINGAPORE – GIBRALTAR – WEST INDIES.' The worldwide operations of ships controlled from Whitehall are portrayed in the film as taking place simultaneously, with local time zones being normalised by the Navy's timekeeping. '1400 Zulu', the particular 'moment' isolated by the title, unites all the distant vessels and their duties to suggest the Navy's omnipresence, and its operational readiness:

> At this moment, it's 1400 Zulu in Navy time, two o'clock in the afternoon in Whitehall … North of Bermuda, it's 10am as a guided missile destroyer heads west nor'west to rendezvous with a tanker … 3000 miles east, near Gibraltar, at 1400, an aircraft carrier prepares a division of Buccaneers … A further 5000 miles eastward, it's early evening off Singapore where a cruiser's attack radar scans for the echoes … It's 1400 Zulu in the North Sea, where a coastal minesweeper rolls on for her fifth sweep of the day over a World War II minefield … It's mid-afternoon southeast of Malta, and a commando ship will soon be disembarking vehicles, weapons and men … It's 5pm off Aden, where a frigate and her consort are hunting a submerged submarine.'

These widespread deployments reflect the continuance of colonial commitments, while the ships and their operations evince a combination of traditional duties and the impetus of modern technology. The work of coastal minesweepers is literally perpetuating a task from World War II. The sub-hunting frigates off Aden are described as employing 'still secret' sonar equipment applied to wartime experience, in a process described as dependent upon 'modern electronics' and 'higher mathematics' as well as 'old-fashioned luck'. The introduction of helicopters for amphibious assault and anti-submarine warfare is said to have 'changed the tactics of war', while batteries of missiles and new forms of

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[19] Edward Hampshire, *From East of Suez to the eastern Atlantic: British naval policy 1964–70* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.49.

[20] *Timepiece* (COI, 1966) similarly portrays the international operations of the contemporary RAF in Hong Kong, the Mediterranean and Cyprus, as well as numerous bases in the UK.

propulsion like gas turbines and nuclear power have transformed the Navy's ships and submarines.

The power of progress is also manifested in the most recent *County*-class guided missiles destroyers, whose leap in comparable 'performance and fire power' is claimed to be 'as advanced as the first ironclad warship over the wooden hull'. However, many of their advanced features such as air-conditioned compartments and pre-wetting systems are needed to counteract the effects of nuclear fall-out. The voice-over accompanying the depiction of underway replenishment of a destroyer by a Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker extols the skills and equipment needed to support global deployments, but also concedes that, 'in a nuclear age, the Navy accepts the destruction of its ports and shore facilities'. This stark admission of the realities of a future nuclear conflict contradicts the timelessness and continuity of the Navy's missions and operational areas stressed elsewhere in the film. If such nuclear exchanges were to take place, the tradition mission of defending trade, forwarded as the Navy's *raison d'être* at the film's opening would become irrelevant. Such a major conflict could also only be understood within NATO strategy in Europe, distinct from the disparate locations and their associated inherited duties detailed by the film. The film's often uneasy balance of technological development and historical carry-over becomes centred by its end on the acquisition of submarine-launched Polaris missiles, and the Navy's ownership of the national nuclear deterrent. *Fourteen Hundred Zulu* was made after the decision to purchase Polaris, and notably the film's ending previews this transformative development as simply a renewal of the Navy's identity as the nation's primary defence. The concluding voice-over alongside a montage of a Polaris missile launch promotes the idea that inauguration of the submarine deterrent patrols is consistent with the continuation of colonial-era commitments:

> The development goes on – weapon systems, propulsion units, strategy and tactics are changing year by year, for the Navy is ready around the world, around the clock. Day and night, from the Equator to the polar regions and a thousand feet below sea level and 50,000 above, the Navy exercises, develops and trains: trains for national security, trains for worldwide emergency, trains for the battles that may never come, because of the deterrent value of the Royal Navy.

To confirm the lineage of the modern navy and its coherence within naval history, a final title details the Articles of War from 1661: 'It is upon the Navy under the good providence of God that the Wealth, Safety and Strength of the Kingdom do chiefly depend.' This assertion of an unbroken cultural connection restates the Navy's national significance even more forcefully than the recollection of the Battle of the Atlantic at the film's opening.

This paradoxical discourse of maintained tradition and technological renewal permeates naval documentary and public information films, but is

also discernible within contemporary films produced for recruitment. *Catch Me Going Back* (COI, 1965) and *Four Men Went to Sea* (COI, 1972) offer rounded depictions of recruitment, training and life at sea as distinguished from boring or menial jobs ashore, including service aboard the latest surface ships and submarines. *Nelson's Touch* (1979), a Navy public relations film, seems to undermine a potential recruitment message by detailing the shortcomings of a hapless young sailor ironically named Harry Nelson. However, Harry is redeemed by individual instruction by the ghost of Nelson himself (who sagely intones 'it's not the Nelsons that make the Navy, it's the Harrys'), proving that a mutually beneficial place exists for modern youth within the traditional establishment.

In *Know Your Navy* (1969), the pressing need for a recognisable role for the Navy, to promote its recruitment as much as preserve its relevance, is confronted explicitly.[21] The film begins with a series of interviews with varied members of the public, soliciting their opinions of the modern Navy. Apparently speaking to camera in answer to an unseen interviewer's implied questions, their views are intercut and assembled into a scathing and sceptical montage:

> 'I think we ought to stop spending on defence altogether.'
>
> … 'Unilaterally, yes, I would disarm.'
>
> … 'Well, I believe that basically the role of the Navy is still based on outmoded strategy. I don't believe that we have such a need for a navy today as we did have when we were an empire.'
>
> … 'One of the greatest shames, really, is that the Navy, in their present recruiting campaign that they're running in the press at the moment, have a page showing the fleet as it is at the moment, and this just about, y'know, the whole fleet just about covers half the page!'
>
> … 'I think there is still some of the lure of "join the Navy and see the world", although again this is obviously much lessened now.'
>
> … 'What the devil is the Navy supposed to do, anyway?'

The superficially varied speakers provide consistently negative perspectives on the Navy's perceived reputational problems: the declining numbers of the fleet, the loss of appealing overseas postings, and overall its diminished

[21] The exact dating of the film examined here is uncertain since the Imperial War Museum's database states this title was reused for films made in 1965, 1969 and 1971: http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060020484 [accessed 10 November 2017].

relevance to a post-imperial nation. The fallacy of these opinions is immediately revealed by a voice-over, which exposes the speakers' short-sightedness (or 'sea-blindness') to the experience of history, and how this can provide lessons for the present. The interviews are replaced by a montage of newsreel images (beginning with early 20th-century street scenes and succeeded by depictions of World War I, the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler and the Cold War), alongside which the voice-over insists that the Navy's relevance in the present and future must be contextualised by a recognition of the volatility of history:

> Who in 1908 could foresee the world in 1918? Who in the trenches foresaw the unemployment of the 1920s? In 1928, who foresaw that ten years later the whole ghastly business would start all over again? And then, who foresaw the world as it would be after World War II, with the Cold War just starting, with the wind of change leading, by 1958, to the formation of countless small nations, fired anew with that old spirit of nationalism?

These concluding words are accompanied by the sight of the Union Jack being hauled down, but this epigrammatic visualisation of the end of empire links British withdrawal not with past guilt or present irrelevance but with perceived responsibility and obligation within the context of ongoing international crises. As with *The King's Navy* and *First Left Past Aden* in previous decades, *Know Your Navy* appears to assert the requirement for a modern Navy on the basis of the Navy always being needed in the past. Like many succeeding naval images (including the 21st-century documentary portrayals in this study) present and past, heritage and renewal, and youth and experience combine rather than compete in these films in their acknowledgement or avowal of the Navy's significance.

Surveying this range of post-war films, and the rhetorical strategies, historical discourses and visual emphases they evince, underlines the uniformity of treatment, material and approach displayed by official films made for public information and recruitment purposes. Although responding to differing needs and being produced over several decades, these films exhibit a textual consistency that also reflects the 'tendencies' of documentary filmmaking categorised by Michael Renov: '1. to record, reveal, or preserve; 2. to persuade or promote; 3. to analyse or interrogate; and 4. to express.'[22] Even within the establishment-controlled and institutionally motivated circumstances in which these films were produced, a concern to record, an art of persuasion, a role of promotion, a duty of analysis and a desire to express are discernible, which together assert their documentary responsibilities and qualities. While as documents they offer distinctive insights to the state and status of the post-war Navy, as documentaries they inevitably acknowledge and conform to modes of

[22] Michael Renov, 'Towards a poetics of documentary', in *Theorizing Documentary* ed. by Michael Renov (Routledge: London, 1993), 12–37 (p.21).

representation and address. They can be seen to adopt recognisable documentary methods and modes which commonly articulate complex contemporary materials. Bill Nichols has categorised five representational modes: the expository, often distinguished by directive voice-over commentary; the observational, which implies unmediated scrutiny of a subject; the interactive, which is often marked by on-camera appearances of the filmmaker as interviewer or mediator; the reflexive, which intentionally reveals its own processes of production and representation; and the performative, which is frequently overtly stylised, experimental or self-reflexive in approach.[23] In relation to the examples discussed above, public information films (e.g. *The King's Navy, Fourteen Hundred Zulu*) adopt the informative and persuasive approaches of the expository mode, while recruitment films (*Catch Me Going Back, Four Men Went to Sea*) alternate or combine this with the observational. Notably, atypical examples exhibit aspects of the reflexive and performative mode in confronting societal and generational change (e.g. *Nelson's Touch*), addressing topical, unseen or controversial aspects of the post-war Navy's operations (such as *First Left Past Aden*), and striving to justify the service's continued existence (like *Know Your Navy*). These aspects of form and technique unite naval films with the ethos and practices of British wartime and pre-war documentary filmmaking, but also crucially anticipate the later iterations of television documentary representations of the Royal Navy that constitute the focus of this book – and which are plainly susceptible to other and additional commercial factors of production and popular appeal. As records and defences of, and adverts and testimonials for, the Navy, these films occupy the same critical, formal and ideological frameworks applicable to all documentary representation. John Corner defines this understanding of documentary-making and -viewing as three emergent and related themes:

> which can be represented in the form of a couplet of tension and potential conflict. These are *art/reportage* – the status of the documentary as aesthetic artefact and as referential record: *truth/viewpoint* – the perennial question of documentary veracity in relation to the subjective dimension of its methods and discourses, and *institutions/forms* – the 'embedding' of documentary-making within different political, economic and social orders, within different landscapes of public knowledge which, though they may not be directly visible, carry implications for practices and usage.[24]

Corner's characterisation of these wider documentary emphases as key conceptual binaries in tension can also stand as a succinct summary of the span of

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[23] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp.31–75.

[24] Corner, *The art of record*, p.11.

naval documentary representation and the conflicts inherent within it. If previous informational and recruiting films such as those produced by the Admiralty and COI induced scrutiny of their truth, objectivity and participation in establishment discourses, television documentaries of the Navy must be subjected to the same critical evaluation, with an additional awareness of the influence of entertainment, commercial, subjective or partisan perspectives. However, these factors also offer the potential for more penetrating, objective observations without institutional constraint (q.v. *Sailor* and the recent documentary series produced by Channel 5 and cumulative documentary works made by Chris Terrill – see Chapters 5 and 6). In this respect television documentary can demonstrate a 'core of reliable referentiality', and an inclusive audience reach to assume an influential position of 'agency' for 'public information'.

However, Corner's last binary and its repercussive significance represent perhaps the most concentrated and apposite condensation of what is at issue in any realist representation, and which is of overarching importance for the representation of the Navy as emblematic national institution: the explicit or implicit 'embedding' of documentary with different 'orders' of political, economic or social significance. Corner's terms and definitions warn us that these might be compromised, obscured or manipulated within the 'landscapes of public knowledge', which assume critical importance in the consideration of national mass media and its pervasive, persuasive portrayals of institutions and communities.

In Chapter 1, two important productions of the 1970s are examined as progenitors of televisual naval representation. The documentary-drama series *Warship*, produced over several years by the BBC, provided entertaining stories about the contemporary Navy that popularised the service for recruitment purposes. This success has not been replicated by more recent drama productions, and its predictable fictions were overtaken by the impact of the landmark documentary series *Sailor*, shot aboard HMS *Ark Royal*. The observational precedent of *Sailor* and its strikingly candid portrayal of the Navy echo into the productions of the 21st century. In tracing the evolution of realist naval representation, Chapter 2 analyses two divergent documentary series from the 1980s. Aired just before the Falklands conflict, the partisan series *Sea Power* strove to assert the Navy's relevance in an era of cuts in defence spending. By contrast, *Submarine* represented a documentary precedent in its revelatory observational record of training and life on board Royal Navy submarines. Broadcast in the wake of the Falklands conflict, *Submarine* embodied a new sense of responsibility towards its subject and the frameworks of state violence, from which subsequent submarine-based series can be seen to diverge in their interactive and performative documentary forms.

Chapter 3 returns to the subject of the naval drama, examining Granada Television's *Making Waves* and the Australian series *Sea Patrol* in their contrasting failure and success in reaching audiences with realistic narrative depictions. In concentrating on contemporary documentary dramas alongside

factual series, this study does not consider historical naval dramas such as *Hornblower* (Meridian, 1998–2003) or fictional thrillers such as *Vigil* (BBC, 2021). Subsequent innovations in the form, address and appeal of factual television and their relevance to naval subjects form the bases of the remaining chapters. In the context of 'infotainment' and 'docusoaps', Chapter 4 looks at the documentary treatments of recent controversial naval construction programmes, while Chapter 5 examines the updating of *Sailor*'s observational record in the persuasive stylisation of Channel 5's popular *Warship: Life at Sea* series. The series of documentary maker Chris Terrill, which are distinguished by intimate access to their subjects, are examined in Chapter 6. Terrill's output has spanned and recorded several decades of cultural and sociological change in the Navy. The appeal and authenticity of his work are predicated on their incorporation of a variety of documentary practices, and its success can be gauged not just from its popularity for the television audience but by its resonance with the Navy itself.

In analysing and evaluating the many and varied televisual representations of the Royal Navy over several decades, the scope of this project is inevitably very broad. Simply considering documentary treatments of the Royal Navy since the 1970s necessitates the acknowledgement of the changes the Navy itself has undergone as a national institution over that period: the impact of the Cold War; the withdrawal from empire encapsulated in the 'East of Suez' doctrine in the 1960s; the reframing of the Navy purely within a NATO context in the 1970s; the Falklands War in the 1980s; the Gulf Wars; the Global War on Terror; and most recently a reignited confrontation with Russia. There are also the factors of recruitment and gender equality in the armed forces, the impact of technology, the status of national shipbuilding and other industrial, social and political influences affecting the service, and relevant to and finding representation within television programming. Over the same period British television and its forms of factual programming have changed even while they have returned repeatedly to the Navy as a factual subject. Over the period in question, new television channels as much as new and evolving televisual formats have altered the programmes in which the Navy appears as an indicative, unusual, familiar, sensationalised or generic element. Therefore, transformational changes of the Royal Navy as institution and as documentary subject have simultaneously accompanied (and driven) the transformation of factual television. The Navy has changed while television has changed around it and, ultimately, television can also be seen to have changed the Navy. This long and persisting relationship between the Navy and television reveals important aspects of the aesthetics, influence and responsibility of factual programming in relation to the familiar and commonplace and the atypical and remarkable in the human world, but above all offers key insight into a representative national institution and focus of national identity.

The documentary and drama series discussed in this book represent a record of evolving documentary practice indebted to examples of the past but also

devoted to a consistent subject with ties to national, cultural and representational pasts. If documentary can be said to 'mimic the canons of expository argument, the making of a case, and the call to a public rather than a private response', the case made collectively by televisual representations of the Navy is for public recognition of its significance as an emblematic British institution.[25] The Navy exists in the national interest, but appears on screen as a subject constantly re-presented *for* the nation's interest, for education and investigation, for scrutiny and support, as national mirror and cultural reflection.

[25] Nichols, *Representing Reality*, p.4.