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THE FORTIFICATION OF OUR DOCKYARDS.

By Major-General Sir E. F. DU CANE, K.C.B.

I THINK I ought to write a few words with reference to Admiral Colomb's comments on my article on the "Fortification of our Dockyards," in the February number of this JOURNAL.

His contention that the members of the Defence Commission of 1860 accepted for our country the position of having, broadly, an inferior Navy is of importance only because if such manifest wrong-headedness is established it would create a prejudice against them, and, without further argument, discredit anything they might have recommended. Perhaps this is why it is so strongly insisted on in the face of direct evidence to the contrary. About a year ago an assertion that they held this view was made in a letter to the *Times*. I wrote a letter to that journal—signing only my initials—in order to relieve them, as no longer able to defend themselves of such discredit. In this letter I asserted, as one who had been directly and indirectly in contact with them at the time, and cognisant of the views which then prevailed, that they did not assume any such position. A few days after appeared a letter from Admiral Sir George Elliot, the only surviving Commissioner, thanking me for my defence, endorsing every word of it, and referring to the "derision" with which their recommendations had been treated by Admiral Colomb. Here, then, is direct testimony of what they thought. Admiral Colomb, however, now goes so far as to say that "whether the Commissioners were aware of it or not, they were supposing a permanently inferior fleet," which seems to me to remove the imputation from wrong-headedness to a still lower grade in the intellectual scale; and as he admits that "almost anybody such as they were"—"full of the false ideas of the day," would have reported in the way they did, he would appear to postulate that the whole generation were incompetent, which I venture to submit would dispose of his theory by the method of *reductio ad absurdum*, and show that he entirely misunderstands their views. To a person reading, without any foregone conclusion, the passages quoted from their report by Admiral Colomb, there is nothing in them which is not quite consistent with their idea of general superiority but local and temporary inferiority of our fleet. The fact of our having a superior Navy is directly admitted in the correspondence which led to the Commission, but the necessity for a larger Army, and for fortifications to assist it, are contended for notwithstanding. I have no doubt that in their minds the necessity for such superiority was so much an accepted commonplace that there was no necessity especially to assert it, more particularly because it actually

existed. The correspondence shows that the point on which we were thought to be at a disadvantage in connection with our Navy, was that the French organisation—by which I understood the "*conscription maritime*"—might enable them to expand for war quicker than we could; give them, in fact, a temporary advantage. If the Commission had dreamt that in a later generation an attempt would be made to fasten on them the views now attributed to them—which their contemporaries did not do, so far as I remember—they might possibly have taken care to fill up their arguments so as to make such a contention impossible. What they did, and did intend to, assert, is that our fleet having a large area to guard might be locally and temporarily inferior at some vital point, say the Channel. Admiral Colomb admits this position in fact when he shows (p. 400) that we have had to let our interests abroad go, in order to retain a sufficient fleet in the Channel, which shows that the choice has had, and may have again, to be made, and might be decided wrongly, and that it is desirable to prevent a fatal blow being struck before such an error could be repaired.

Admiral Colomb, nevertheless, lays it down as a principle that "there can be no such thing as a superior fleet temporary inferior." He does not quote any authority for this doctrine, and if it is the "first principle" which I and others are said to find a difficulty in grasping and appreciating, I confess that though I believe I grasp his meaning, my appreciation of it is that it is utterly unsound and cannot be accepted as an axiom. I understand him to admit that the ideas held by the Royal Commission, though now considered by him and others to be false, were the views held by the best authorities of the time, and that they continued to be held until some distinguished naval officers passed "from darkness to light" some time in the eighties, but that there are now some backsliders who are falling away from the true principles then discovered. Almost at the same time as I received the April number of the JOURNAL with Admiral Colomb's article, I met with a criticism by a literary man on some recent books on modern warfare. In it there occurred these words:—"Our experts have only theoretical knowledge—theories which, however divergent, they can always find some other expert to support—to go upon, and they have to draw their conclusions either without making any allowance for the mistakes and chances which in actual warfare must largely help to protract the struggle, if they do not actually determine the issue." When the issue of authority is raised in this discussion, it is well to bear in mind this distinction between our modern instructors and those who fifty years ago led public opinion on warlike matters. The latter had formed their views by years of practical warfare, or by direct transmission from those who had acquired such experience, and for any of us poor moderns to postulate that they did not understand their business as well as we do seems to me to take up an untenable position.

Taking the illustration given by Admiral Colomb on page 459, I do not think he gives us credit for even moderate intelligence when he supposes that we fail to see that if our enemies have several separate fleets, each of which we watch by a superior fleet; the inferior fleets if

united will still be inferior to our fleets, supposing them to be united too. But if that kind of reasoning settled the question, there never would be any war. It is necessary to take into account chance, accident, audacity, and above all, skill in war manœuvres, by which a force which is on the whole inferior manages to be superior *at the vital point*. No doubt the Royal Commissioners, if their own knowledge of the art of war was not enough, had not forgotten that Napoleon had manœuvred to bring his Toulon fleet into the Channel to join his Channel squadrons, while successfully misleading Nelson so as to keep him from joining our Channel fleet, and remembered that his manœuvres succeeded up to the point of placing a numerically superior fleet in these waters—they may have thought that we could not always rely upon our enemy's forces being morally inferior, nor on his admiral failing in nerve, which elements were in our favour on that occasion, and that our future existence should not depend on such contingencies.

The "fundamental proposition" that "the fortification of ports would save the fleets within them" cannot be held to be contrary to history and experience (page 460), but strictly in accordance with them, for if it had not been for the fortifications the fleets at Toulon and Brest, etc., would of course have been destroyed by our fleets, instead of being sealed up by months or years of watching outside in a manner in which I believe it is considered doubtful whether we could act under modern conditions.

Admiral Colomb tells us (page 461) that assuming the naval defence to break down, the seizure of a position on the coast is "clearly not compatible with any attack upon a dockyard," and "the withdrawal of forces, naval and military, or both, to attack a fort or dockyard ever so lightly garrisoned, when the main object is the landing of forces on unprotected parts of the coast, is a piece of stupidity not conceivable on the side of any enemy." Of course the landing is not the main object, but only a step to something further. One may doubt whether an attack on a dockyard would be "a piece of stupidity not conceivable on the side of any enemy," for we know that Napoleon in discussing his projects long afterwards pointed out that he did not intend to commit himself to conquering and subjugating England, but that he aimed at ruining her power at sea by destroying her dockyards; so that instead of saying that "the dockyards would fall with the rest of the country if the invasion succeeds," the Commissioners argued that to strengthen such vital points as our dockyards by every means in our power was the way to prevent the invasion succeeding, or perhaps even being attempted.

The idea of fortifying our dockyards is discussed as if it originated with the Commission of 1860, and had never been adopted before either in this country or any other. The fact is that the work done at the period under discussion was little more than replacing what already existed by works embracing a wider area to suit the conditions of the time, just as we also extended and enlarged our dockyards—so that if the experienced men of 50 years ago were so utterly wrong, as it is contended that they were, so also were their predecessors for generations past, for they had

always strengthened their means of defence by fortifications—and further than this, all foreign nations have done the same thing at all times. In the face of all this, and of the experience of Sebastopol, so recent that the ignorance of history attributed to the Commissioners can have hardly allowed them to forget it, we are told (page 464) that they show us “it is inconceivable to think of a dockyard being attacked on the land side by an invading army,” *i.e.*, that the Commissioners imposed on all the great political and professional authorities of the day, and persuaded them to fortify our dockyards on the land side by a chain of reasoning which conclusively showed such an attack on a dockyard to be inconceivable. This again seems to me to disprove Admiral Colomb's reading of the Commissioners' report by the *reductio ad absurdum*.

We are bid (page 463) to “note the far-fetched notion of the necessity for capturing any dockyard or all the dockyards before they fall in due course into the conquerors' hands,” on the supposition of our fleet being driven into port and an army landed. This, however, is what we did at Sebastopol—we did not attempt to conquer the country, but only to capture the dockyard—and if there had been no fortifications there we should have done the business in a very short time, instead of being a very long time, and this would in our case make all the difference. It is the land force, and not the sea force, which takes and holds a dockyard. Our superior Navy were not able to hold Toulon in 1793 after they had got it by the goodwill of the inhabitants. We failed to hold the landworks, and therefore had to retreat from the harbour, and allow an enemy to create in that port a new fleet which gave us a great deal of trouble, and was able to contest our superiority.

Captain Mahan, the great champion of sea-power, distinctly asserts the necessity for fortifying the naval bases. The narrative I have given in February of the genesis of the Commission of 1860 shows that it was the outcome of long consideration by our highest and most competent authorities of our then position, and that it was created to consider more especially what could be done by fortification to add to our security; a glance at the composition of the Committee above corroborates this, but it might escape notice that the only civilian member, was one who had made himself conspicuous as a writer on that art, and in no other branch of the art of war.

It is not my purpose to write an essay to prove that fortification is an obstacle to the capture of a place and so an addition to military strength, though Admiral Colomb seems to deny it. On such a point the views of the Great Duke of Wellington are good enough for me when he bids us provide “an army in the field aided by all the necessary fortification which science can suggest.” There is not a nation, however strong its Army, which does not fortify its vital points, and it is impossible to assume that all nations at all times have been wrong on such a point; but it may be necessary to point out that no advocate of fortification claims for it any more than that it will enable a smaller and inferior force to resist one that is superior, and to delay the capture of the place it protects, and such delay may on occasions be of supreme importance.

I do not believe that any writer or thinker on this subject, either now or in the past, has ever thought of "turning public opinion from maintaining a superior Navy," nor from "having an efficient and powerful Army behind it." I am confident that those who think as I do would let nothing stand in the way of our having a Navy as powerful as can be desired and as our resources will furnish, and besides this an Army much stronger than we now have; but it is this totally unfounded fear that this object is aimed at which is at the bottom of a great deal that has been written of late years, and which has distorted the views of the writers.