

## Reviews

Department] comes around from the other side of the office and says, 'Something very strange is starting to happen: the website is being flooded with people signing up as party members'.

Over 20,000 people joined the party over the following few days, 'providing much-needed cheer for those of us left battered and bruised by the election and fearing for the future of liberalism' (pp. 357–58).

Unlike some of those associated with Nick Clegg's period

as party leader, Jonny Oates is still very much active in the party, filling the role of climate spokesperson in the Lords. His book is a mixture of a personal story and a political one. Although I wish there'd been more on the politics, there is a good deal, and it's thoroughly worth reading. And the personal story is deeply affecting. Very highly recommended.

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just between Fisher's enthusiasts at the Admiralty and those around Lord Charles Beresford, commanding the Channel fleet and a Conservative MP, but between a Liberal navy and Conservative army.

Corbett's view was that we had usually fought limited wars, based on economic blockades – using superior naval forces – which often had the effect of drawing enemy fleets out to fight, as at Trafalgar. It was a doctrine which assumed that there would be no invasion of the UK, as long as we kept enough troops at home to deter any small, sneak attacks. As long as we kept 70,000 troops at home, then an enemy's invasion fleet would need to be big enough to overwhelm at sea.

That depended on the primacy of the navy and on civilian, political control of the armed forces. It was opposed by what Corbett called the 'continental' or the 'German', *Götterdämmerung* approach to war, backed not only by the most conservative elements in the army, but also by Charles Repington, military correspondent of *The Times*, and the author of the 1915 'shell crisis' that was eventually to topple Asquith.

For Corbett, the purpose of the navy was to police the freedom to trade. In wartime, it was to make possible a war of closing down the enemy's ability to trade.

It was sometimes a difficult strategy to square with popular opinion. Keeping defence

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## Liberal navy or Conservative army?

Andrew Lambert, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the battle for a national strategy* (Yale University Press, 2021)

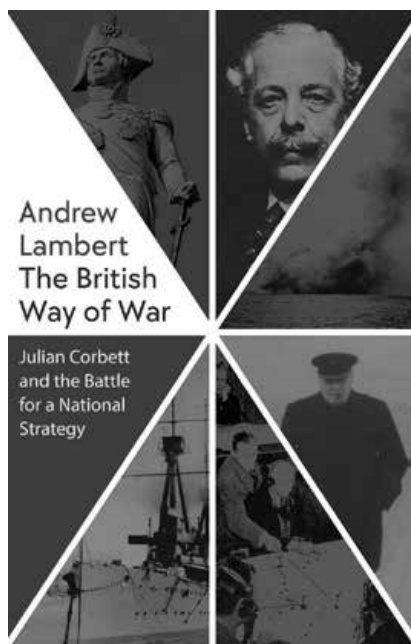
Review by **David Boyle**

**R**EADING THIS BOOK has been something of a revelation for me, and especially perhaps for someone deeply into naval and Liberal history. It explained what went wrong in the First World War – and why there was such terrible suffering and loss of life. It was, in short, because our government briefly forgot that the UK has a traditional way of making war, developed since the days of Drake, which had served us very well.

This is an intellectual biography by a leading naval historian of one of the leading naval

historians of the century, Sir Julian Corbett. Corbett was a Liberal, but he turned down the opportunity of becoming a politician, to be a leading visionary – a kind of official historian to the Admiralty – tasked with drawing out from the previous centuries what this 'British way of war' was.

In this respect, he was supporting the radical reforming First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher. And, as such, he was swept up in the great strategic controversy that so divided the forces in the early years of the twentieth century – not



spending manageable and under control may have been tough enough; but suggesting that battles were not actually that important must have upset the old guard of both services.

But these were also ways of avoiding the illiberal fate of conscription, which was, of course, the issue that split the party most of all during the war. Peacetime conscription was a particular anathema for Corbett – it would make the empire seem aggressive and would draw down the rage of the world upon it.

Corbett died relatively young in 1922, having finished only three volumes of the official naval history of the war, *Naval Operations*. So he wasn't there to press home his message – about why his ideas were not used in 1914.

First, perhaps, because, the Asquith government would not take a decision between these two, rival naval and military factions. Second, they may also

– though Lambert does not really speculate about this – have been nervous of upsetting the army so soon after the Curragh mutiny in March 1914, which had been so encouraged by the Conservative leadership. Third, there was the fear of encouraging imperialist divisions on the Liberal side – which was why Sir Edward Grey's 'Entente' negotiations with the French stayed secret (by the way, it is extraordinary that our opponents in two world wars were *surprised* when we declared war – so much for deterrence...).

What was supposed to happen was a similar chain of events to 1905, when relations with imperial Germany had reached crisis point. At that time, Fisher had sent the Channel fleet into the Baltic – after which Germany backed down. This had been Fisher's plan in the event of war with Germany, which is why he built three battlecruiser-monitors to be ready in 1916, to go back into the Baltic to stop the flow of iron ore into Germany. As Nelson had found before Trafalgar, that was also the best way of getting an enemy fleet out and into action – something that only happened once in the whole war (and the Battle of Jutland seemed pretty indecisive at the time).

Here was the real reason why Fisher resigned as First Sea Lord in 1915 – not because he was going senile, as Churchill implied, nor that he was smarting from all the subtractions

from his Grand Fleet to go to the Dardanelles – but because Churchill had transferred submarines from the Baltic to the Dardanelles (including my cousin's E14, the subject of my book *Unheard, Unseen*). The Dardanelles venture was the only proper attempt made during the whole war to fight in the traditional way, not including other smaller efforts by Keyes at Zeebrugge or Lawrence of Arabia. It was beset by foot-dragging by both services and too many delays to be successful. But it wasn't the obvious failure of this attempt to knock Turkey out of the war that upset Fisher so much. It was the evidence that his Baltic project no longer had official approval.

The trouble in 1914 was that the army took control of the agenda. The first meeting of the war cabinet included four ministers, including Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty, plus seven generals and only one admiral (Battenberg) – who said little. Churchill was a young man in a hurry – he didn't want to wait for Fisher's Baltic fleet to be ready. But he agreed on the importance of avoiding having a mass conscripted army on the western front 'chewing barbed wire'. The result was the Dardanelles venture, with only lukewarm support from either Fisher or the War Office. That was why he was bundled out of office just as the Liberal Party was.

A sad end for Fisher; and yet, despite himself, Churchill

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found himself fighting a Corbett-style war of national survival in 1940.

I have no idea what Lambert's politics are, and the book – as he warns us at the beginning – is far too long. Yet I feel I so much better understand those critical years of the last

Liberal government as a result of reading it.

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– ‘a long early modernity’ (p. 422) – that began with the political struggles of the early seventeenth-century Stuart monarchy. Early modernists, the book's principal audience, will no doubt find much to admire in this rich, expansive and meticulous work; but it raises questions for historians of modern liberalism, too, offering, among other things, a kind of archaeology of the multiple concepts, reformist ambitions and institutional designs that finally came to fruition in the nineteenth century.

Crudely speaking, the ten chapters (chapters 3 to 12) that make up the main body of the book, following the introduction and a scene-setting chapter on the East India Company, fall into two sorts. Chapters 3 to 6 are more discursive in orientation, excavating the pre-modern roots of a cluster of concepts that we now take for granted. Chief among these is the one noted above: the fiduciary premise that ‘public office’ is a ‘public trust’. As Knights details, this was pieced together over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries via a series of political skirmishes, some of which indeed were fundamental. The Civil War (1642–51) was, conceptually at least, partly fought in these terms (ch. 5). Each side invoked the idea that ‘public office’ was a ‘trust’, consolidating conceptual and linguistic innovations that had seeped into public life from the start of the century. The key question by mid-century

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## Public office and public trust

Mark Knights, *Trust & Distrust: Corruption in Office in Britain and its Empire, 1600–1850* (Oxford University Press, 2021)

Review by **Tom Crooks**

**T**HE IDEA THAT officeholders should serve the public interest, rather than their own, is now a fundamental axiom of public life. Public office is a public trust and officeholders are accountable to the public on precisely this basis. It is an axiom that nineteenth-century liberalism, in its various party-based forms (as liberal Toryism, Whig reformism and Gladstonian Liberalism especially), can justly lay claim to having done most to institutionalise in Britain, thereby purifying the state from all manner of official abuses and forms of corruption. It was liberalism that did most to root out sinecures and the sale of office, restrict the use of official patronage and nepotism, bring an end to Anglican and aristocratic fiscal and administrative privileges, not to

mention liberate the press from stamp duties and introduce mechanisms of official auditing. It was liberalism, in other words, that principally put paid to what historians call ‘Old Corruption’.

Yet, as Mark Knights argues in *Trust & Distrust*, we need to recast entirely how we understand this achievement. Conventionally, the successes of nineteenth-century liberalism are understood in the context of an ‘age of reform’ that began in the 1780s with the birth of popular radicalism, the loss of the American colonies, and a short-lived campaign for ‘economical reform’ designed to curb the corrupting ‘influence of the Crown’ over parliament. For Knights, however, we need to probe much deeper than this and set the blows struck for purity by liberalism in the context of a pre-modern landscape