



DEFENDERS OF THE QUEEN IMPERIAL AND COLONIAL DEFENCE 1850 - 1901

KEYNOTE - DR CRAIG WILCOX

ONE-DAY CONFERENCE SUNDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2023
WAVERLEY RSL

161 COLEMAN PARADE, GLEN WAVERLEY, MELBOURNE.



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The 19th Century Imperial Maritime Experience and its Impact on Rear Admiral Creswell's Strategic Thinking

Throughout the 19th century, political and maritime influencers played a pivotal role in shaping the grand-strategic thinking of the British diaspora in Australia. This thinking was significantly influenced by the enduring cultural connection to the 'Homeland,' Britain, predisposing most commentators to emulate British cultural, political, and social norms. Moreover, it nurtured an intellectual deference to the notion that Britain would remain the dominant sea power worldwide. The historian Gregory Melleuish aptly described this strategic consciousness as being entrenched in 'the meta-narrative of Empire.'¹

The 'meta-narrative of Empire' gave rise to a series of biases, most notably a conservatism bias, which significantly influenced the decision-makers of the time, consequently shaping the debates on how best to defend Australia. The assessment of threats to Australia's sovereignty and wealth was largely viewed through the bifocal lens of the Royal Navy's dominance and the increasingly independent perspectives of parsimonious colonial governments², which grew more conflicted throughout the economic booms of the mid to late 19th century³. Local perspectives on threats drove the discussions concerning the most suitable form of defence for the Colonies.

This essay will delve into the national cognitive biases prevalent among the majority of Colonists and their leaders, who perceived Australia as being 'girt by beach.'⁴ These biases were challenged by advocates for an Australian Navy, with a focus on the experiences of William Creswell during the 19th century. Creswell, through a combination of various arguments, contended that Australia's threats would manifest on the oceans, along the sea lines of communication, from which the nation derived its wealth⁵. He argued that Australia required a blue-water navy to safeguard its interests. Furthermore, he believed that the geostrategic 'centre-of-gravity' of Britain, and by extension the Admiralty, would largely influence their actions, despite their rhetoric. Australia could not rely solely on the British perspective to align with the perceived risks identified by the Australian Colony or Commonwealth⁶. Creswell's 'girt by sea' perspective played a significant role in shaping the preconditions for the development of a 'blue-water' Australian Navy in the early 20th century⁷.

¹ Melleuish, Gregory, *Meta-History Narratives in Nineteenth Century Australia, The Power of Ideas: Essays on Australian Politics and History*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2009, pp. 215–46 at p. 215

² Evans, Michael, *The Third Way: Towards an Australian Maritime Strategy for the Twenty First Century*, Army Research Paper, no. 1, Canberra, 2014, p. 8

³ Lambert, Nicholas A., *Australia's Naval Inheritance; Imperial Maritime Strategy and the Australian Station 1880-1909*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs Number Six, Maritime Studies Program, Canberra, December 1998, pp. 1-3

⁴ Evans, pp. 6-7

⁵ *The Australian Naval Shipbuilding Program of 1909*, Semaphore, Sea Power Centre, Canberra, Issue 3, 2009

⁶ Lambert, p. 6

⁷ 2011 - A Year of Naval Commemoration, Hindsight, Sea Power Centre, Australia, Canberra, Issue 01, February 2011

At the onset of settlement, two key factors influenced local thinking. First, the concept of the 'tyranny of distance' instilled a strong sense of isolation⁸. Second, an unwavering faith in the defensive capabilities of the British navy coexisted with growing concerns about colonial activities of other European powers and the potential risk to sovereignty posed by Asian migration into a sparsely populated land⁹. Perversely, it was this unshakable faith in the Royal Navy's dominance and the might of the Empire that impeded the critical analysis required to understand the vulnerability of the nation's security.

During the early 19th century, the British and the Admiralty were entangled in various forms of conflict among imperial powers and the tumultuous upheaval of independence movements reacting to the decay of control by European guardians. As colonies began to emerge on the Australian landmass, local governors started to develop a uniquely Australian world-view. However, this view remained fundamentally anchored in the British geostrategic structure, albeit that the local perception of the 'tyranny of distance' was in play from the beginning; Governors were acutely aware of the challenges of defending a landmass so vast that it could take weeks for a sailing ship to traverse the country¹⁰. While Australians considered themselves culturally British, the geographic isolation of the Australian settlement led to an understandable divergence from London and the Admiralty regarding security concerns. By the mid-19th century, debates were beginning to centre around how Australian communities fit into the larger Empire.

The writer Stuart Ward introduced the concept of 'communities of interest' to describe the thinking of the Colonies during the mid-19th century. New South Wales Governor William Denison stressed the importance of a Great Power, as exemplified by the Royal Navy, in providing defence for Australia. Ward argued that the strategic thinking of the Colonies from the mid-19th century would always be understood in the context of the particular needs of 'Australia's Empire.'¹¹ Recognizing the changing strategic status of the Colony and its location in the western Pacific, the British Admiralty established an independent Command in 1859, initially under a Commodore¹² (later a Vice Admiral after 1902), to oversee the 'Australia Station', based out of Sydney. This transition was arguably driven by the increasing value of Australia to the UK rather than an acknowledgment of any existential threat to the Colony.

In his 2021 PhD thesis, author Samuel Webster highlighted three key qualities of Australian strategic imagination during the mid to late 19th century¹³. Firstly, there was a prevailing belief that the British Empire and the Admiralty were so powerful that they would deter any existential threats in this remote part of the world. Second, Colonial responses to these perceived threats revolved around what is now referred to as 'same by design, different by necessity.' This manifested as a push to develop an independent land and sea force to supplement the Empire from an Australian geostrategic perspective. Finally, the Colonies' geographic location was closer to their perceived threats than the heart of the Empire.

Even in the earliest days of British imperial concerns and settlement, there was a growing realization that the experiences of those who were settling this vast continent would shape the discussions on the required response to local concerns. In late 1826, Governor General Ralph Darling, contrary to experienced Royal Navy officer CAPT James Stirling's advice¹⁴, sent a party led by Major Edmund Lockyer to establish an outpost around King George's Sound. Darling's

⁸ Bunge, William, *The Structure of Contemporary American Geographic Research*. *The Professional Geographer*, 13 (3): pp. 19–23

⁹ Bisley, Nick, *Australia's Strategic Culture and Asia's Changing Regional Order*, NBR Special Report #60, The National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, December 2016, pp. 3-5

¹⁰ Statham-Drew, Pamela, *James Stirling – Admiral and Founding Governor of Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 2003, p86

¹¹ Quoted in Webster, Samuel Murdoch, *Australian Strategic Imaginaries*, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney, Doctoral Thesis, 2021, p. 16

¹² Wilkins, John M, *Australian Naval Reserves, 1859-2015*, Self-published, Melbourne, 2015, p. 29

¹³ Webster, p. 31

¹⁴ Statham-Drew, Pamela, *James Stirling – Admiral and Founding Governor of Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 2003, pp. 62-63

approach to grand strategy reflected a 'continentalist' appreciation of maritime power, which stemmed from his experiences commanding the 51st Light Infantry Regiment during the Peninsula War.

This approach contributed to a complacent view that it was inconceivable for Australia to face an existential threat while the Royal Navy remained supreme, and the proof of those holding this view was that the Australian landmass was indeed never invaded. The first significant steps toward an independent maritime force were initiated by the self-governing Colony of Victoria. Lieutenant-Governor Latrobe, alarmed by the lack of focus on the security of the substantial amounts of gold being stored and shipped out of the Colony, ordered the construction of the modern steam-powered sloop, the HMCSS Victoria. In the first decade of Victoria's existence, they shipped 21,500,000 ounces of gold, which would be equivalent to over \$30 billion in today's currency¹⁵. Arguably, this view was driven more by a fear of piracy and disruption to trade than a risk of sovereignty.

The first geostrategic shock came during the lead-up to and during the Crimean War, with concerns about Russian ships sortieing from Vladivostok into the Pacific and endangering trade routes¹⁶. Some Colonists feared a direct attack from Russia. Governor Denison's strategic thinking, and the fort in Sydney Harbour that bears his name, served as a reminder of Australia's deep-seated connection to imperial causes, but also as a vestige of settler-colonial anxieties about imperial defence¹⁷.

At this point, doubts began to emerge about the Royal Navy's ability to come to Australia's aid, as the Colonists were troubled by the realization that what had happened to the original inhabitants when the British arrived could easily happen to them¹⁸. Creswell was born in Gibraltar during this period, and there were still people alive in Australia who remembered the very earliest days of settlement, along with the profound sense of isolation from the UK.

Throughout the mid-to-late 19th century, a growing fear developed that a hostile foreign force could easily overwhelm local defences and seize sovereignty over parts of the continent, as was happening in other parts of the world¹⁹. The strategic risk was that a small population in a vast country could not effectively defend everywhere. The debate in the Colonies began to focus on the form this defence should take. There was general agreement that Australia would always need to rely on the UK and the Royal Navy to provide a guarantee against sovereign and existential threats. However, this reliance was tempered by a growing unease that the UK's strategic outlook might not always align with the increasingly independent perspectives of the Colonies²⁰.

During this time, William Creswell joined the Royal Navy in 1865 at the age of 13. His early years in the Navy afforded him a broad view of the British Empire, witnessing inter-imperial rivalry and experiencing the reach of the Royal Navy but also seeing how thin that reach could be. He visited Australia in late 1869. After serving in various capacities, including suppressing the slave trade in East Africa and fighting pirates off Malaya and in Chinese waters, he left the Royal Navy and immigrated with his brother to Australia in 1878. He initially intended to become a pastoralist but came primed with an understanding of the issues and concerns that Australians faced during the

¹⁵ Wilkins, John M, *Australian Naval Reserves, 1859-2015*, Self-published, Melbourne, 2015, pp. 27-28

¹⁶ McGuire, Paul, *The Price of Admiralty*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1944, pp. 3-4

¹⁷ Ward, Stuart, 'Security: Defending Australia's Empire', in *Australia's Empire*, ed. Stuart Ward and Deryck M. Schreuder, 1st ed. Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 235

¹⁸ James, Neil, *Grand strategy, strategy and Australia*, in *The Strategist*, ASPI, 29 May 2014, viewed on 7 August 2023

¹⁹ Bisley, Nick, *Australia's Strategic Culture and Asia's Changing Regional Order*, NBR Special Report #60, The National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, December 2016, p.5

²⁰ Webster, Samuel Murdoch, *Australian Strategic Imaginaries*, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney, Doctoral Thesis, 2021, pp. 14-15 and pp.22-23

latter part of the 19th century, along with a sound comprehension of the capabilities and limitations of the Royal Navy²¹.

From the late 1880s, the Colonies began to perceive their growing role in the Empire and their obligation to demonstrate their strategic capability. They felt the need to contribute to broader efforts to maintain the Empire. This sense of responsibility was linked to the conviction that they needed to prove their worth to the Crown by ensuring their own defence and participating in the Empire's strategic interests. After the British garrison was withdrawn in 1870, the Colonies increased their financial and personnel commitment to the defence of their territories to ensure British engagement in their strategic affairs²². For example, New South Wales sent a contingent to the Sudan War in 1885.

In 1865, the British Parliament ratified the Colonial Defence Act, which was agreed upon by the Colonies. This act recognized the growing local demand for increased security against perceived threats. New South Wales and Victoria were the first to acquire sovereign naval forces, which they obtained with generous British subsidies. The purchase price was just one part of the cost of owning and operating warships, with the Colonies covering the expenses of maintaining, repairing, and operating these new ships. The Admiralty provided the sole docking and refit base in the country in Sydney, a critical capability to support larger warships²³.

These Colonial ships, however, were smaller and less capable than the Royal Navy's larger blue-water cruisers. This period was marked by rapid technological advancements that quickly rendered older warships obsolete. Maintaining and operating these more capable ships was considerably more expensive. Consequently, a significant number of local politicians balked at the idea of running such a fleet²⁴, arguing that there was no benefit to building Colonial cruisers while the Royal Navy managed the Australia Squadron²⁵.

In the late 19th century, there was a growing view among Colonial and British authorities that it was worthwhile to establish a single Australian defence force, albeit under the command of Imperial officers. This idea was shaped by the view of some British officers and even a few Colonial officers who regarded their Colonial counterparts unfavourably. There was also a negative perception of the work culture of Colonial seamen, particularly after an experiment by the Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Squadron, Admiral Tryon, in 1885. He attempted to have Colonialists crew Armed Merchant Cruisers in response to a Russian 'scare'. However, Colonial seamen posted to the newly refitted *Lusitania* refused to work under an RN Officer and demanded Colonial rates of pay, leaving a negative impression on the Admiralty and even sympathetic observers like Admiral Tryon²⁶.

Ex-Royal Navy Officers who immigrated to Australia in the late 19th century brought their experiences to bear on maritime grand-strategy. They combined their fundamental knowledge of the United Kingdom's structure, the security it provided to the emerging Colonies, and their views on self-sufficiency. Despite a growing chorus of national commentators advocating for an Australian Navy, the Admiralty and even many Colonial leaders maintained a strong view that the Colonies were ill-equipped to manage a blue-water fleet²⁷. This scepticism was rooted in concerns about professionalizing the officer corps, the perceived amateurish nature of the sailors, the

²¹ RAN Website, Vice Admiral Sir William Rooke Creswell biography, accessed 20 February 2023

²² Parkin, Russell and Lee, David, *Great White Fleet to Coral Sea – Naval Strategy and the Development of Australia-United States Relations, 1900-1945*, Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, pp. 1-2

²³ Lambert, Nicholas A., *Australia's Naval Inheritance; Imperial Maritime Strategy and the Australian Station 1880-1909*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs Number Six, Maritime Studies Program, Canberra, December 1998, p. 1

²⁴ 2011 - A Year of Naval Commemoration, *Hindsight*, Sea Power Centre, Australia, Canberra, Issue 01, February 2011

²⁵ Lambert, pp. 2-3

²⁶ Lambert, Nicholas A., *Australia's Naval Inheritance; Imperial Maritime Strategy and the Australian Station 1880-1909*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs Number Six, Maritime Studies Program, Canberra, December 1998, pp. 5-7 and p. 9 and p. 129

²⁷ Lambert, p. 6 and p. 129

insular strategic perspectives of the government²⁸, and the prohibitive costs of running such a fleet²⁹.

Operational considerations also shaped the debate, particularly regarding control of a local fleet and its state of readiness. The Australian Naval Squadron, while partially subsidized by the Australian colonies, remained under the control of the Admiralty. The cruisers based in Sydney might not be used locally if the Admiralty considered events elsewhere to be of higher priority or disagreed with local risk assessments. Queensland's annexation of New Guinea in 1883 to prevent a German annexation, which ran contrary to the British view at the time, exemplified the growing concerns of Colonial Premiers about the expanding imperial activities in the Pacific. This situation, along with further Great Power competition, such as the Japanese invasion of Formosa and the war between the United States and Spain in the Philippines, alarmed Colonial leaders, who nonetheless continued to support the agreement to maintain the Australian Squadron³⁰.

In 1885, while visiting Adelaide, Creswell met an old shipmate, Commander John Walcot, commandant of the South Australian Naval Forces. Walcot offered him an appointment as a Lieutenant Commander, and Creswell accepted the offer, becoming the First Lieutenant of HMCS Protector. It was during this period that Creswell's strategic thinking started to formulate the idea that the solution to the risk of the Royal Navy being committed to the defence of the Empire, rather than the Colony, was for Australia to develop adequate naval forces to supplement the RN squadron based in Sydney³¹.

Around the same time, Admiral Sir George Tryon, who was one of the more sympathetic Commanders-in-Chief of the Australia Squadron, spent two years in the Colony. In 1886, Tryon argued that the Colonial Governments needed to explore ways to augment their naval forces to better cooperate in maritime affairs and to develop a degree of local autonomy. He believed that unless the Colonies owned and operated their ships independently, they would never fully grasp the true costs involved. His discussions with the Colonial Governments laid the groundwork for a future autonomous force, more than merely for local defence. The Jubilee Conference of 1887 resulted in a compromise with the Admiralty and the British Government against the parsimonious Colonial Governments. This agreement maintained the Australia Squadron at full strength and stipulated that the British would fund most of an Auxiliary Squadron crewed by Colonial sailors but officered by British or British-trained officers. While it would operate under the direct control of the British Commander-in-Chief, it would retain a significant level of autonomy in certain prescribed operations in the region³².

Creswell's thinking was also undoubtedly influenced by the rise of Australian nationalism during the 1890s. Although he remained in South Australia as a Commander and then Captain during this period, Creswell actively participated in national discussions about how this newfound nationalism should manifest in the maritime context. There was still tremendous pride in being a part of the British Empire, but a growing view that British geo-strategic imperatives were becoming divergent to the needs of the Colony, and did not represent their sovereign views of how to deal with regional risks³³. The Admiralty's doctrine of naval concentration whereby British ships supposedly 'protecting' the Colony would be diverted to where the Admiralty perceived the enemy's Centre of Gravity, concerned the Colonial leaders who were beginning to appreciate that this assessment of the CoG might not align with their own³⁴.

²⁸ McGuire, Paul, *The Price of Admiralty*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1944, p. 6

²⁹ Lambert, p. 7

³⁰ Parkin, Russell and Lee, David, *Great White Fleet to Coral Sea – Naval Strategy and the Development of Australia-United States Relations, 1900-1945*, Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, pp. 2-3

³¹ *The Australian Naval Shipbuilding Program of 1909*, Semaphore, Sea Power Centre, Canberra, Issue 3, 2009

³² McGuire, Paul, *The Price of Admiralty*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1944, pp. 4-6

³³ Webster, Samuel Murdoch, *Australian Strategic Imaginaries*, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney, Doctoral Thesis, 2021, pp. 27-28

³⁴ Webster, pp. 28-31

As the late 19th century drew to a close, arguments in favour of a sovereign Australian Navy became stronger³⁵, but the specific form it should take remained a matter of debate. On the one hand was the view that, in matters of existential threat to the Colony, that they could not possibly afford to raise a sufficient force to make any appreciable difference, and as such it made complete sense to throw in their lot with the British³⁶. The counter view was that the British would not always respond to a local threat in a manner to which the Colonial Governments expected.

The Admiralty was debating this point with men such as Rear Admiral Lewis Beaumont, the Commander-in-Chief of the Australia Squadron (writing in late 1901 after Federation), wrote "the one point upon which they [the Australians] seemed unwilling to enter was the release of the Admiralty from the obligation of keeping the ships in Australian waters at all times; they knew that that clause in the Agreement had been held to be of much importance by the Premiers at the London Conference of 1897, and they were not inclined to alter or disturb it. I believe that, as long as any contribution is accepted this condition will be demanded. The Ministers thought that in time of War the request to take the Ships beyond the limits of the Station would be readily granted, but I do not think so, as long as there appeared to be any risk of attack from stray Vessels of the enemy"³⁷.

The Colonial Conference of 1902 produced a naval agreement that provided for a financial subsidy and the acceptance of Australians as sailors (but not officers) in Royal Navy ships stationed on the Australian Station. Creswell criticized this approach, calling it a "rent-a-navy" scheme³⁸, echoing the concerns of the Australian government.

The Admiralty conscientiously opposed the idea of an Australian Navy³⁹, believing that a small Navy would be inefficient, unprofessional, and prohibitively expensive and thus become obsolete⁴⁰. Their views contrasted with those of many Australian leaders who increasingly saw the need for a local naval force.

The momentum for the development of an Australian Navy grew stronger over the first decade of the 20th century. The Admiralty eventually acknowledged Australia's defence needs in light of the deteriorating international situation, and orders for new vessels to create an independent Australian fleet were placed. Creswell argued that this fleet was necessary to secure trade in Australian waters and that it would force an enemy to dispatch a significant force to counter it effectively. This fleet would enable Australia to patrol its own sea lines of communication and hold a major expeditionary force at bay while waiting for the Royal Navy to arrive⁴¹.

On the 10th of July, 1911, King George V granted the title of 'Royal Australian Navy' to the Permanent Commonwealth Naval Forces. This became effective on the 5th of October, 1911, when Australian ships began flying the British White Ensign⁴². Rear Admiral Creswell became the First Naval Member of the Royal Australian Navy.

From 1913, the newly-established Royal Australian Navy fleet was an integrated part of the Empire's strategic strength. Australia's grand-strategic goal was to maximize its sovereign freedom of action as a nation-state. In a grand-strategic sense, Australia's freedom of action depended on

³⁵ Evans, Michael, *The Third Way: Towards an Australian Maritime Strategy for the Twenty First Century*, Army Research Paper, no. 1, Canberra, 2014, p. 8

³⁶ Lambert, Nicholas A., *Australia's Naval Inheritance; Imperial Maritime Strategy and the Australian Station 1880-1909*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs Number Six, Maritime Studies Program, Canberra, December 1998, pp. 129-130

³⁷ Lambert, Nicholas A., *Australia's Naval Inheritance; Imperial Maritime Strategy and the Australian Station 1880-1909*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs Number Six, Maritime Studies Program, Canberra, December 1998, p. 82

³⁸ Lambert, p. 80

³⁹ Lambert, p. 129

⁴⁰ Lambert pp. 127-130

⁴¹ *The Australian Naval Shipbuilding Program of 1909*, Semaphore, Sea Power Centre, Canberra, Issue 3, 2009

⁴² *Australia's Navy: 106 Years Young*, Semaphore, Sea Power Centre, Canberra, Issue 2, 2007

preserving sole sovereignty over its continent, as all existential threats and serious risks came from, or over, the sea.

The experiences of Colonial mariners in the 19th century, combined with the visionary efforts of individuals like Creswell, played a pivotal role in the development of the Royal Australian Navy during the first decade of the 20th century. This transformation turned the Australian Navy from a collection of obsolescent vessels into a professional and world-class fighting force. While the path was challenging, the foresight of individuals like Creswell and Deakin was richly rewarded in 1914 when the powerful German East Asiatic Squadron was deterred from implementing its plans for cruiser warfare in the Pacific. In the words of Prime Minister W.M. 'Billy' Hughes, "the great cities of Australia would have been reduced to ruins, coastwise shipping sunk, and communications with the outside world cut off" if it weren't for the efforts of the Australian Navy⁴³.

The establishment of the Royal Australian Navy marked a significant shift from being a subsidiary of the Royal Navy to a fully-fledged and sovereign capability. The Navy became a national endeavor that involved various aspects of government and society. When it became clear that the grand strategy of the major allied powers would result in the ceding of Australian sovereignty, the independent Navy, along with the Army and Air Force, returned to fight in what was arguably the closest thing to an existential conflict Australia has experienced⁴⁴; this shift in alliance and dependence from the British to another grand power during the Second World War would not have been possible without individuals like Creswell, who recognized the grand-strategic imperative for Australia and set the preconditions for the nation's success in that second existential conflict.

Ainsley Morthorpe

Captain, RAN

CO HMAS Cerberus

SADFO HMAS Cerberus precinct



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⁴³ Australia's Navy: 106 Years Young, Semaphore, Sea Power Centre, Canberra, Issue 2, 2007

⁴⁴ James, Neil, Grand strategy, strategy and Australia, in *The Strategist*, ASPI, 29 May 2014, viewed on 7 August 2023

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