

Roger Morriss. *Science, Utility and Maritime Power: Samuel Bentham in Russia, 1779-1791*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015. ISBN 978-14-72-41267-6. Pp. xvi, 274, 2 maps. Hardback; e-book. £70.00.

Samuel Bentham (1757-1831) naval innovator, traveller and engineer was the younger, more practically minded, brother of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The brothers shared many interests in social reform, and improved efficiency. Where Jeremy imagined a more rational society, Samuel improved the organisation, management and infrastructure of dockyards – initially in Russia - and then between 1796 and 1812 in Britain. Highlights of his work in Britain included Marc Isambard Brunel's block making machinery, the first military hardware ever made using mass production techniques based on interchangeable parts, the use of steam power for dredging, and the managerial principle of individual responsibility. Long neglected by naval historians his career has been a major theme of Dr Morriss's work on dockyard management and administration across the past thirty years. This book examines the impact of a decade spent in Russia on Bentham's thinking.

Unlike his fellow naval architects Samuel Bentham was very well connected. His wealthy father moved in the reformist Whig political circles of the Lord Shelburne, lived close by Parliament, and sent his sons to the elite Westminster School. Samuel chose to train as a shipbuilder, and made his journey to Russia with the financial help of his father. This journey was part of a significant movement of skilled Britons to the Russia of Catherine II, an enlightened autocrat who attracted the interest and sympathy of many reform-minded philosophers. Samuel travelled to Russia armed with a battery of letters of recommendation from British statesmen, scientists and philosophers. Bentham's journey to Russia received extensive support from naval, scientific and commercial interests. Among those who supported his mission were leading naval officers including Admiral Lord Howe, who expressed particular interest in the Russian Navy, and identified specific ships that he wished to learn about. These contacts mattered

because he had no practical achievements to his credit. Throughout his time in Russia Bentham provided his patrons with extensive reports, maps, mineral and timber samples, and even Russian state documents. While Morriss never addresses the issue it would not be stretching the point to argue that he was a spy.

Russia was at once a potential ally against France, and growing strategic concern for Britain. Furthermore it dominated the vital market in naval stores; the timber, masts, hemp, sailcloth and tar that sustained British shipbuilding for war and commerce. Not only did Bentham report on Russian markets and naval developments, but made his way east through Holland, where he spent weeks researching Dutch naval and commercial shipbuilding. The scientific nature of his journey, and he would be engaged with scientists at all his destinations, was an ideal cover for a national agenda. Alongside these agendas Bentham was also anxious to establish himself in business, using his London connections with government and trade to set up as a supplier of strategic naval resources. These three agendas dominated his twelve year residence in Imperial Russia. Bentham used his connections to ingratiate himself with a Russian political and scientific elite anxious to recruit Western expertise, and well-disposed towards Britain, as the single most important export customer. Bentham used his connections to acquire Russian state papers, and worked closely with the British Ambassador, who sent reports addressed to Bentham's father back to London. Tsaritsa Catherine and her favourite, Prince Potemkin, patronised the young Englishman, and under their auspices he made a series of astonishing journeys across the expanding Russian Empire, from St Petersburg to Archangel in the north, across Siberia to the Lena River and the Chinese Border in the east, recently acquired Polish lands in the west, and the newly-acquired Crimea in the south. He was in all probability

the first Englishman to see the emerging naval base at Sevastopol. He quickly learnt Russian, to add to his French and German language skills, and discussed the language with his brother Jeremy, who came out to visit and seek an opening for his reformist agenda with the Empress.

Under the cover of his own commercial interests, and those of his patrons, Bentham began to uncover Russian commercial and geo-strategic agendas, critically the desire to monopolise the trade between Asia and Europe, through Persia and China, and to dominate the Black Sea. A report sent home in 1784 included detailed maps of the expanding Russian Empire, and the observation that with naval bases, extensive shipbuilding resources and cheap labour in the Baltic, White and Black seas Russia could 'pour forth fleets from the south and from and north to encircle Europe, and lay in her claim for a share of the empire of the oceans. In point of commerce what now may be expected?'(p. 128) Bentham sent this report home through Istanbul, to avoid the inquisitive and suspicious Russian authorities. In return for his reports Bentham pressed his contacts to help find skilled artisans to develop Russian resources for his own projects.

While Morriss is fascinated by Bentham's work on river craft and small warships used in littoral operations leading to the capture of Ochakov, which earned him a gold sword, a major decoration and Russian estates, the book overlooks the larger patterns that shaped Anglo-Russian relations. As an aside Bentham met the American naval officer John Paul Jones during the Ochakov campaign, reckoning him to be decent enough ship's master, but no officer. The Russians disliked Jones because he was common, and above all because he was mean, he did not keep a hospitable and full table for his officers; such stinginess was simply unacceptable in the Russian service.

In 1788 Bentham secured a posting to Siberia, where he began work on a personal and national agenda to open the river trade into China, but the golden age of Anglo-Russian partnership, which provided the context for his residence, was rapidly coming to an end. By 1790 Britain and Russia were set on a collision

course in Asia and the Near East, Russian attempts to monopolise trade by occupation and conquest imperilled British projects to extend their profitable Asian and Turkish trades by improving relations with local regimes. As Catherine and Potemkin planned a major military campaign to drive down the Amur River, conquering Chinese provinces as they went, opening a port and trading with Japan, the British Government dispatched Earl MaCartney's mission to seek improved trade with the Chinese Empire. Both powers were seeking to exploit the commercial opportunities of the North Pacific, highlighted by Captain James Cook's third voyage. Catherine read the Cook narratives, and employed officers and men from that expedition to develop Russian Pacific trade. This would involve Russian conquest for, as the British Ambassador at St. Petersburg observed, they 'had no notion of drawing advantage from another country by any means but conquest.' (p. 221) Although the Russian Conquest of the Amur Basin lay fifty years in the future, the conquest of Ochakov in 1790 made Russia the dominant Black Sea power, and threatened the survival of the Ottoman Empire, a major British trading partner. This event made a powerful impression in London, among men who had read Bentham's reports. In the event Bentham did not return to Russia from a planned short visit to London in 1791, the year when Pitt the Younger's government mobilised the fleet and demanded Russia withdraw from Ochakov. Domestic political opposition obliged Pitt to back down, but not before Admiral Lord Hood, appointed to command the projected Baltic fleet, sought out Bentham to return his papers and, one suspects, discuss the state of the Russian Navy. Shortly after the crisis passed Potemkin died, ending Bentham's privileged *entrée* into Russian affairs.

The book begins with a discussion of Benthamite thinking, and then follows the Russian phase of his career through the correspondence. Morriss sees Bentham's time in Russia as an important preparation for his career in the Royal Dockyards, which he has addressed in two important books.¹ Yet the

¹ Roger Morriss, *Royal Dockyards During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983) and Idem., *The Foundations of British Maritime*

Russian material can be read in a very different way, and demands further work. Bentham's reports were the most significant sources of information on Russian ambition and power at a time when economic and political relations between the two powers were changing rapidly. His correspondence with Lord Howe and Lord Hood, the leading men in the Navy, reflected an anxiety about an emerging rival, one that controlled the naval stores essential to sustaining seapower. It is unlikely the Russians were under any illusions about Bentham. They exploited his scientific and practical skills to transfer the latest technology and, as he was very well aware, closely monitored his covert activities.

The focus on Bentham may obscure the wider significance of the book. Students of Anglo-Russian relations and Russian naval history will find a wealth of evidence to prompt further research. People and places pass without further comment; for example the British born Neapolitan Naval Minister Lord Acton appears on page 40, without being identified, or connected with naval service. Earl MaCartney's mission to China is ignored, and the Ochakov Crisis of 1791 passes with little comment. The discussion of Russian naval policy and shipbuilding would have benefited from John Tredea and Eduard Sozaev's magnificent recent study.² They have much to say about the dockyards Bentham visited, the ships he inspected, and the campaigns in which he served, while emphasising the scale and ambition of Imperial naval activity. Morriss reports that Lord Howe requested information on the 78 gun Baltic ship of the line *Izekiel*. Tredea and Sozaev reveal that it had been designed by Admiral Sir Charles Knowles, while in Russian service. Bentham's report compared the *Izekiel* to the similar British *Foudroyant*, noting that like most Baltic ships the Russian vessel did not have such a deep draught as the British design (p. 52).

This is a very important book for students of

Anglo-Russian naval, commercial and technical relations in the age of Catherine the Great, one that will repay readers who are ready to push the evidence in different directions.

Andrew Lambert
King's College London

Ascendancy: Resources, Logistics and the State, 1755-1815 (Cambridge & New York, 2014).

² John Tredea and Eduard Sozaev, *Russian Warships in the Age of Sail, 1696-1860: Design, Construction, Careers and Fates* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2010)