

## A HISTORY OF THE ROYAL UNITED SERVICES INSTITUTE.

By SHELFORD BIDWELL

*Brigadier R G S Bidwell was a Vice President of the RUSI. He was Editor of the RUSI Journal from 1971-1975, and Deputy Director from 1973.*

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The origin of our Institute, today deeply concerned with the problems of national and international security lies, paradoxically, in an era when Britain had emerged safely and victoriously from the ordeal of a long war when there was every hope for a long peace. The armed forces of the Crown have never stood higher in the public regard than they did fourteen years after the Battle of Waterloo. The Royal Navy and the Army were conscious of duty well done. Nelson, the dead hero, was already part of the national myth. Our living hero, Wellington, enjoyed a pre-eminence as a soldier and later as a statesman among his countrymen, never surpassed by anyone except Winston Churchill.

Successful armed forces can all too easily sink into authoritarianism, brooking no criticism, rejecting any analysis of the lessons of the immediate past, having become the mental prisoners of a successful but obsolescent technique of warfare. The great Duke himself, whose carefully contrived victories in the Peninsula had laid the foundations of the Army's traditions, was in some respects the most obdurate authoritarian ever to command British troops, the persistent opponent of every innovation except, strangely, what was to become RUSI.

### **The old campaigner**

It would not have been remarkable if a small coterie of professionally-minded officers had formed an association to study the lessons of the late war. A core already existed in the subscribers to Colbourn's *United Service Journal* (no connection with the future RUSI Journal), and the process was started in February 1829 by a letter to that periodical signed by 'An old Egyptian Campaigner'. Paraphrasing his florid style, he argued that 'a United Service Museum' should be formed, managed entirely by naval and military officers, and under patronage of the monarch, then King George IV, and the commanders-in-chief of the armed forces. Such an institution would prove that the two professions have entered the lists of science, and are ready to contend for honours *tam Artibus quam Armis*'. The enthusiastic response may well have exceeded the worthy 'Old Campaigner's' expectations. It encouraged a Commander Henry Downes Royal Navy to assemble a group with a view to forming a committee for action, to which King George's First ADC was commanded to convey 'His Majesty's gracious and high approbation of the undertaking and of the principles on which it is proposed to conduct it', which were stated to be suitable for 'a strictly scientific and professional society, and not a club'. The death of the

King delayed matters, but the Duke of Clarence expressed his readiness to become a patron so, encouraged by the powerful support of the Duke of Wellington, the First ADC, Sir Herbert Taylor, re-submitted the project to King William IV, and was able to assure the committee that 'it could proceed under his Majesty's gracious auspices.'

On 25 June 1831 the committee met in the Thatched House Tavern in St James Street, then a popular resort of officers in London, long since vanished. The chair was taken by Major General Sir Howard Douglas, in his person a symbol of the 'United Service': a soldier who was the leading expert on naval gunnery. The resolution that the institution be established was put by the future Viscount Hardinge of Lahore, Field Marshal, Secretary of State for War and Governor General of India, seconded by the future Admiral Francis Beaufort, the famous hydrographer. The first title adopted was 'the Naval and Military Museum', altered in 1839 to 'the United Service Institution', and to 'the Royal United Service Institution' by Royal Charter of Incorporation in 1860, retained until the present day when our longer but more explicit title was adopted to make our role clear to the general public.

### **The RUSI needs YOU**

There seems to have been no doubt in the mind of the founding committee about of the role of the Institute. The museum and library were the vehicles, but intellectual drive would depend on the imagination and liberty to freely express their ideas of the ordinary members. To this end the founders were politically astute enough to invite thirty of the most distinguished officers of the day to become vice-presidents, but they also perceived that the future of the Institution would depend on attracting as many of the youngest and most junior officers as possible, fixing the subscription for them as low as 10s. per annum. They hoped for 100 per cent recruitment, but though they were disappointed in this, a healthy number joined. (The best young officers are by no means all of a studious or analytic turn of mind. In the 1970s a discreet piece of 'market research' revealed that the junior membership was largely from those officers who aspired to staff training and the Joint Services Staff College).

Exactly to define the mission of an institution whose studies include the whole spectrum of defence is virtually impossible. The version adopted for inclusion in the Royal Charter was 'The promotion and advancement of Naval and Military science and Literature'. If 'military' in its wider sense is taken to embrace air power, that serves for today. Though lacking the precision necessary for terms of reference, it is concise, indicates the aim and permits flexibility at times of violent change. Progress was rapid and fruitful. Gifts to the Museum flowed in, the library was established, and a regular series of lectures and meetings inaugurated. In 1843 nineteen lectures were delivered and seven papers read. In 1841 the membership had risen to 4243. In 1857 the Journal began publication. A gold medal for

essays submitted in alternate years on naval and military subjects was inaugurated in 1878, but superseded in 1900 by the Chesney award, and the Trench Gascoigne Prize for submissions by officers under thirty years of age was instituted.

Where the Chairmen and Councils equally command our admiration is in the hard work of financial management and administration. In those early years the Whitehall area was quite undeveloped. By careful investment the Council was able to accumulate funds to buy land and premises to accommodate the new Institute, complete with show rooms and a lecture theatre at a cost of £10,000. Then, in 1871, regardless of the previous expressions of goodwill and promises on the part of the Government, the Treasury gave the Institute four months notice to quit, without compensation, as the land was required for development. Vigorous protests secured a stay of execution, but positive help came from Queen Victoria herself, who allotted the Banqueting Hall to accommodate the contents of the Museum. An appeal for funds by Council was generously met, with the Queen, the Prince of Wales and the Dukes of Edinburgh, Connaught and Cambridge heading the list, raising the £23,000 required to lease a plot of land adjacent to the Banqueting Hall and build new offices, a library and a lecture theatre. The new building was opened by the Prince of Wales in 1895. The Institute was thus administratively secure for the foreseeable future, but in 1962 the Government reclaimed the Banqueting Hall, and the exhibits, by then, it must be admitted of purely antiquarian value, were dispersed. In 1970 the lease expired, and the terms for renewal were more than the Institute could afford, but long, tough and patient negotiations enabled the Institute to continue as a tenant.

### **New Direction**

The 1960s saw the beginning of a fundamental change in the mission, or at least the way the mission was interpreted, and the way the Institute managed the intellectual side of its affairs. So far the more active members had done most of the work, providing the flow of papers and ideas, while the in-house staff was run with the utmost economy. For instance, Captain E Altham (1931) combined the roles of Secretary, Editor of the journal and Higher Executive Officer. In 1961 Brigadier Stephenson as Director had only a part-time editor as assistant. As in 1829, the spur of action was applied by relatively junior officers, although unlike the anonymous 'Old Campaigner' and Commander Downes, they were greatly to distinguish themselves later in their careers. In 1963 the future Marshal of the RAF and Chief of the Defence Staff Lord Cameron, Admiral Sir Louis le Bailly and Brigadier Kenneth Hunt, then students at the Imperial Defence College, wrote a letter published in *The Times*, arguing that the country lacked an independent 'think tank' for the academic study of national defence, and that the need could be met by developing and widening the activities of the RUSI. This caught the attention of Lord Mountbatten, who gave it his support, although it was to be twenty years before sufficient staff of the right calibre could be

afforded and assembled to carry out the essential in-house research and compose and edit an adequate range of publications. A beginning was made in 1968, when Air Vice-Marshal S W B Menaul was appointed Director General, and extended the publications to monographs on defence subjects, the reports of the seminars he introduced and the union with Brassey's Publications to produce the Defence Year book, assisted only by an Editor, a Librarian and a Secretary who doubled as treasury and house administrator.

The road to the present satisfactory state of our affairs, as set out in the Chairman Council's report to the AGM of 1991, has been a tough one, the achievement, we must all gratefully recognize of the imaginative and energetic staff of the Institute under the Director, and the constant watchfulness, tact and voluntary labour of successive distinguished Chairmen of Council; as in the 1870s and 1970s, so now.