

The Invergordon Mutiny 1931 & the Admiralty
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V – The People and Justice / La justice du peuple

The Invergordon “Mutiny” 1931 and the Admiralty

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Introduction: a mutiny with no court martial

Protest movements in the Royal Navy are rarely cited as cases of industrial protest in the history of the British labour movement. First because expression of protest in armed forces is legally called “mutiny” and as such was rare and harshly repressed: in the early days of sailing navies, resistance to or refusal of orders given by senior officers was invariably punished by hanging at a section of the main mast. When an entire ship’s company was involved, the leaders were hanged. Second, because the Navy was, in spite of its social significance and its prestige, a secret world for outsiders: this institution was not used to publicizing its internal problems, failures, disorders, as they were handled by senior officers and, if need be, by the High Court of Admiralty, then the High Court of Justice (from 1875). These courts tried all crimes committed on board ships at sea or on rivers.

Nevertheless, it remains that the “Invergordon mutiny” is remembered as the largest mutiny in modern British history: it broke out off the coast of Invergordon, a small village on the north-east coast of Scotland, in September 1931, when the seamen refused to take the ships of the Atlantic Fleet to sea as ordered, in response to the Admiralty’s decision to reduce the

pay of seamen by 10% on average. The men who were there say it was a spontaneous response to an unfair and shameful order which would have reduced the pay of many of the lowest paid by as much as 25% but would have meant cuts of only 3% to most of the officers.

But strangely enough, no courts martial followed. Only two dozen seamen were dismissed. How can one account for this apparent leniency?¹ Why did the government of the day and the Admiralty in particular hush the matter up, while the threat of capital punishment was hanging over the seamen?

Navy seamen and the labour movement

Even if seamen are not entitled to launch strikes and oppose orders of their commanding officers, lower deck grievances have been voiced since the early days of the Navy. They became more visible and vocal in the 20th century as mass media publicized them and because they were endorsed by the labour movement. Indeed, Invergordon reflected, on the part of seamen, an awareness of the new bargaining rights obtained by organized labour since the second half of the 19th century. In Britain the rise of labour helped form what some historians of the labour movement have described as “an emergent system of industrial relations”, and it can account for seamen’s new attitudes towards the naval institution. Newspapers and archives show that from 1900, seamen, in spite of the strict naval discipline,² voiced complaints and grievances about pay and conditions through newly-created benefit societies.³ They were aware of the increased recognition of organised labour and of the principle of collective bargaining by the state.

¹ And yet the Admiralty considered an armed assault on the Fleet (see: Alan Ereira, *The Invergordon Mutiny*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, 115). Interestingly the government of Chile repressed by force a naval mutiny involving some 5,000 men in Sept 1931 caused by massive pay cuts (up to 30%): after initial talks, an armed assault was launched on the mutineers.

² Navy granted commanding officers sweeping powers to punish their men without trial (dismissal, short prison sentence, solitary confinement, lower pay and allowances, disrating...); special publications (like the *King’s Regulations and Admiralty Instructions; A Battleship Commander’s Order Book*) summarized offences and relevant punishment; see: Anthony Carew, *The Lower Deck of the Royal Navy*, 39. Seamen who infringed Naval Discipline Acts could be tried before a court martial but the latter “disregarded some elementary principles of justice” (there were many restrictions about the right of appeal, evidence, cross-examination, sentences...); see: Carew, 33

³ Seamen formed benefit societies in the late 19th c, concerned with improving seamen’s condition (pay, victualling, health...); these “lower deck societies” and journals (e.g. *The Bluejacket*, edited by Lionel Yexley, an ex petty officer who strove to advance the

Indeed, in the first decade of the 20th century, national papers reported numerous signs of discontent among seamen. During the Great Labour Unrest, lower deck societies grew rapidly: for example, blacksmiths, coopers, painters, plumbers, established a Naval Artisans' Death Benefit Association in 1912. The following year able seamen formed the Royal Naval Seamen's Benefit Society. Their most militant members wanted these societies to develop in the direction of trade unionism and link up with the labour movement. They asked for free expression of social grievances.⁴ In 1918 there were some twelve lower deck societies⁵ (gathering some 10,000 service men [Carew, 106]) established at naval stations (Chatham, Portsmouth, Harwich...) and they formed links (Carew, 93) with the Labour party and radical trade unionism.

But the Admiralty did not recognize the role of lower deck societies, which were seen as subversive organizations.

Other factors that may explain this growing link between labour and seamen: On war vessels, there were skilled workers recruited at a later age (such as engine-room artificers, stokers, engineers, electricians, artisans...). The industrial towns hit by depression (shipbuilding and mining having the highest unemployment rate) were great providers of boys for the Navy. Most had trade union backgrounds or saw the interest of trade unionism. Men of the early decades of the 20th century were better educated than their predecessors and expected to be treated with dignity. Many read newspapers and journals and probably discussed issues that affected them.

A major influence on the nature of the mutiny was the economic slump, and in particular the growth of mass unemployment. It is generally said the period after the failed 1926 General Strike was marked by a spectacular decline of industrial protest. But the early 1930s still saw mass demonstrations organized by unemployed workers who clashed with police. There

condition of seamen, acting as an intermediary between lower deck societies and the Admiralty; another newspaper was *The Fleet*) expressed their grievances and defended their cause; see: Carew, 1; 43.

⁴ The *King's Regulations & Admiralty Instructions* said: "Officers, Non-commissioned Officers, and private soldiers are forbidden to institute, or take part in any meetings, demonstrations, or processions for party or political purposes, in barracks, quarters or camps, or their vicinity; and under no circumstances whatever will they do so in uniform"

⁵ Such as: the Sailors' Soldiers' and Airmen's Union, the Royal Marine Benefit Society, the Officers' Stewards' and Cooks' Benefit Association, ...: they had links with older unions such as the National Union of Railwaymen, the Dockers' Union and the Engineers' Union which provided their organisational expertise.

were also several hunger marches between 1921 and 1936. Britain in the early 1930s was characterized by uneven development and regional differences in wealth and employment opportunities.⁶

Seamen's pay: a long and hotly contested issue

In fact when one looks at the Board of Admiralty's decisions⁷ in 1931 in terms of pay and conditions for both able and ordinary seamen, Invergordon seems to be part of a long reform / struggle that began in the final years of the Great War.

Progress was slow between 1900 and 1931: the pay of the lower deck remained the same between 1853 (1s 7d a day for an able seaman) and 1913. To earn more than this, seamen had to have special qualifications and / or a number of good conduct badges (but these could be stripped away for a small offence). The *Bluejacket*, a militant newspaper defending the cause of ratings, argued an able seaman should be given 2 shillings.

The different pre-war naval inquests and commissions faced much resistance⁸ from ships' captains and the Board of Admiralty on the question of relaxing corporal punishment, solitary confinement of "offenders", and to lower deck grievances, which were, on the contrary, endorsed by Winston Churchill⁹ (First Lord of the Admiralty 1911-1915, 1939-41) and Admiral John Fisher (First Sea Lord, 1904-1909).¹⁰

For Churchill the question of pay was the most urgent of all the lower deck problems in 1911:

⁶ The new industries (producing consumer goods) were located predominantly in the South-East and Midlands.

⁷ NA / ADM 178 / 79: Mutiny in the Atlantic Fleet at Invergordon: memoranda by Board members.

⁸ From 1906 Fisher met formidable conservative opposition inside and outside the Navy, led by Admiral Charles Beresford, the commander in chief of the Channel Fleet, culminating in Fisher's resignation in 1910.

⁹ As First Lord in 1911 Churchill engaged in a great fight to improve the lot of sailors (pay, discipline, conditions were scrutinized). He often had to work against the obstruction of some senior officers and civil servants. In 1939 he made certain that the reforms he had initiated 30 years before were continued.

¹⁰ As First Sea Lord, Fisher reformed the Navy enormously: he made the RN ready for the war with Germany (new battle ships: fast cruisers; submarines), reduced naval expenditures (but not navy's efficiency), allowed: access to officers' schools for poor boys, promotion from the rank, looked after seaman's welfare (food, quarters, discipline, professional prospects).

There is a deep and widespread sense of injustice and discontent throughout all ranks and ratings of the Navy... it is rendered more dangerous by every successful strike for higher wages which takes place on shore. It is rendered more legitimate by the social legislation upon which Parliament is engaged.¹¹

He proposed to increase pay at the lowest level by 4 pence (a day) after three years' service. But he met the opposition of Lloyd-George at the Treasury and had to revise his scheme (3 pence after 6 years' service), approved by Cabinet in December 1912.

After the War, economic grievances were still at the forefront and there was widespread talk of taking strike action: some 38% of men were married and found the cost of living hard to cope with. Men on leave from the Atlantic Fleet were coming home and found their wives could not afford enough food to make ends meet.

We said there had been a growth of trade union mentality among seamen and the Admiralty was aware of that: it decided to look more seriously at the men's welfare. A naval committee in 1918-9 resulted in substantial pay rise: pay rate was raised to 4s a day and pension was increased from 1/2d to 1 ½d a day; widows' pensions were established at two-thirds the rate for men in 1926; marriage allowance was given to seamen over 25. Yet men recruited as from October 1925 had lower rates: 3s (instead of 4s). So there was in effect a two-rate system.

Even Len Wincott, one of the ringleaders of the mutiny (he was dismissed for this and ended up joining the Communist party) agrees that the seamen's conditions were better in the 1920s than they had been previously. They had better meals, a big pay rise in 1919 that more than doubled rates at the lower level, more relaxed day-to-day discipline, fewer courts martial, fewer summary punishments:

In fact the men of the British Navy were completely satisfied with their lot. Except for the American Navy, no navy in the world served under such favourable conditions as we did... no officer dared to use strong language to a lower deck man ...the food was good ... nobody can deny the pay was comfortable and came regularly, and a single man, if he was economical, could make a little saving for the future. In home waters leave was granted three times a year, two weeks at a time. (Wincott, 86-87)

¹¹ The Minimum Wage Bill secured miners' wages that were nearly double what sailors could hope to obtain.

Wages were all the more attractive that prices had fallen in 1919-1923, raising the value of the new pay by 25%.

In spite of these advances, trade union mentality among seamen did not disappear: during the 1926 General Strike, in Scotland, rumours of mutiny among troops at Glasgow's barracks circulated. The 1920s saw much unrest among men serving in Black Sea, Baltic and at home stations (at Devonport and Sheerness): there were several cases about pay, leave, resulting in victimization and harsh sentences (such as death, penal servitude, immediate sea posting or discharge).

The Admiralty was anxious to repress signs of dissidence and unrest: in order to undermine lower deck societies, it organized several welfare conferences (though largely ineffective) and helped form the Royal Naval Benevolent Trust in 1922.

In the end seamen's societies were weaker after 1925. As a result, men could express their grievances only through the service channels (i.e. through their officers), which in the end discouraged many from doing so.

At Invergordon, the Admiralty's decision looked sudden but in fact men's good wages had already been under threat in the 1920s for financial reasons (Treasury wanted to revise pay scales and War Office accepted the principle of future cuts in naval pay: at the lowest level able seamen would be 25% worse off¹²). In May 1931 the government was forced by the economic slump and rising unemployment to reduce public spending: all civil servants, state employees, seamen, policemen, the unemployed (on national insurance) faced that prospect.¹³ British employers too contemplated it. Hence there was already much anxiety and fear among seamen during the summer. By early September, the government had decided to implement the pay cuts, officially announced on 10 September in the Chancellor's emergency budget.

The Admiralty perhaps did not envisage men would dare to oppose the move, given their sense of duty and the punishment incurred, such as dismissal (quite hard with the economic recession of the years 1925-1931: "At present men repress their feelings because, with the labour market in a

¹² In 1925 UK returned with difficulty to the Gold Standard (had left it in 1919). Britain's expensive pound prevented growth of foreign trade, ie industrial output; it meant rising unemployment and lower wages (since value of £ had risen).

¹³ Taxation should be raised by £24 million and expenditure cut by £96 million (Ereira, 31).

very bad state, few are tempted to risk their fate as civilians, therefore they growl and bear with conditions as best they may".¹⁴

A collective strike?

When the fleet arrived at Invergordon on the 11th September, the men still believed cuts would not materialise and the 1919 rates would be maintained: they read the news of course but there was no official Fleet Order confirming it. In the end the only notification received by seamen was an order pinned on ships' notice boards on the morning of Sunday 13 September 1931, that the reduction in pay would take place immediately. The men were furious, first because the cuts were huge, as much as 25%: able seamen¹⁵ hired from 1925 were paid very low wages: such a reduction implied sacrifices which were too heavy for many men to bear. It was disastrous for married men for whom every penny counted. For example, out of a total basic weekly pay of £1 4s 10 d (Carew, 151), an able seaman with a wife and a home had to pay: 12s 6d for rent, 3s for light and cooking, 2s 6d for coal, 2s for insurance, plus 2 s for extra rations.

In the words of the First Lord of the Admiralty, the cause of the outbreak was that "many decent men were driven to distraction by anxiety about their homes; that they were swept off their feet by this anxiety".¹⁶ At that time many seamen were marrying while in the service. The financial problems of married men were always a major issue for the lower deck movement (Navy began to give marriage allowance to the over-25s only from 1918; things were worse for those who married under 25).

¹⁴ *Naval Chronicle*, 3 April 1925.

¹⁵ The system of rating seamen as "ordinary" or "able" was introduced in the 17th century. An able seaman was considered to be one "who is not only able to work, but is also acquainted with his duty as a seaman. The rating of seamen was the duty of the captain in consultation with the master (in charge of navigation) and the boatswain (discipline, sails, rigging). An able seaman had to be at least 20 years old, with 5 years' experience at sea.

An ordinary seaman (from 18) held the lowest rating on a ship, and was described as "one who can make himself useful on board, but is not an expert or skilful sailor". Seamen were not trained formally and developed their skills through experience (familiar with rigging, knots, sails, boats, guns, and life at sea). They joined the service as boys aged between 15 and 16, served for 12 years, and most were eligible to sign on again for a second period of 10 years in order to complete time for pension.

¹⁶ NA / ADM 230: Correspondence between Sir Bolton Eyres-Monsell, First Lord of the Admiralty, and Sir Roger Keyes, Admiral of the Fleet following the Invergordon Mutiny (1932-1934)

The new pay scale was unfair: there was a dual pay rate, unfavourable to those taken since October 1925. The lowest paid were the most affected. Moreover, officers only faced an 11% decrease. Men of the other armed forces (Army and Royal Air Force) were not asked to face similar pay cuts.

The decision looked sudden: no preliminary announcement of the proposed cut was made, no official attempt to discuss the cuts with the men. Cuts would start in two weeks after the official announcement: it gave no / little time for men and families to adapt to the new conditions.

Men felt they had been both betrayed and cheated by the Admiralty and the government : it was for many a breach of contract.¹⁷ In 1924 it was said several times in Parliament that seamen's rates would not be cut.

In the next 36 hours, seamen organised impromptu debates and the majority of the lower deck came to the view the cuts had to be fought by protest action. The majority agreed on refusal to carry on working and found the most effective form of action was to refuse to put to sea. Interestingly, the sailors at Invergordon do not describe their action as a mutiny, they call it a strike or passive resistance (though in the strict legal sense, it was a mutiny). Indeed, personal accounts and testimonies show there was no conflict between officers and men:

(a Lieutenant-Commander) I could say that nobody disobeyed my orders, every single seaman saluted smartly, doubled away, then didn't do what I said. Nobody ever refused to obey orders. But the Fleet did not sail. (Ereira, 8)

For Rear Admiral W. Tomkinson, the state of affairs in RODNEY and VALIANT was not so satisfactory. In these two ships the men on the upper deck stood to attention when Colours were hoisted at 08.00; they showed no disrespect; and they cleared up and cleaned the mess decks; but they remained absent from their places of duty, although all essential service were maintained [...] meetings were held, speeches made, and there was much noise of cheering and singing.¹⁸

¹⁷ Government was headed by Ramsay MacDonald (Labour) who got the support of the Conservatives and the Liberals. He would have to cut pay (minus 10-20%) and unemployment benefits (minus 10%): he was a traitor for the *Daily Herald*, the labour movement, the Labour party.

¹⁸ §20, NA / ADM 178/10: Invergordon Mutiny: reports, 1932.

Seamen's testimonies tend to indicate that it was a collective decision, with no single leader:¹⁹ Len Wincott, who helped mobilize his fellow seamen, and became after his discharge from the Navy after Invergordon a communist activist, claims to have led the mutiny but,²⁰ technically, central coordination of the mutiny was impossible as there were no communications between warships: no one knew much about what was going on outside his own ship; it appears to have been a collective action that succeeded because seamen on each vessel stuck to their decision: "you can only hope that the intentions of all other ships involved will be maintained. There is no sure way of knowing" (Carew, 161). Rear-Admiral Tomkinson argued there was some communication between ships:

The spread of the outbreak was greatly facilitated by the proximity of certain ships to each other, which enabled men massed on the forecastles to shout across, and signal to neighbouring ships, threats and exhortations not to be 'yellow' or 'blacklegs'. HOOD for example was influenced considerably in this way by RODNEY.²¹

So for him the movement was organized:

There was an undoubted organisation in the actual outbreak and I am of the opinion that preparation must have been made over a considerable period. It seems likely to have originated in RODNEY and VALIANT, and concerted action was effected at the meetings at the Canteen on the evenings of Sunday and Monday.²²

When the mutiny broke out, the Admiralty was unable to stop it and the contested decision was quickly retracted. Archives show that the government feared the protest could become political, damaging the image of the Navy and the credibility of the government.

¹⁹ Arthur Harwood (stoker), John Emerson (AB) in *Nelson*; ABs George Day, Marshall Brockway and marine Coleman in *Valiant*; Stoker Alfred Fowler, ABs Cyril Bond and Willie Ryder in *Rodney*; ABs Copeman, Wincott, Hill, in *Norfolk...*: did not seem to constitute an executive body, did not act as men's reps.

²⁰ Testimonies from seamen say Wincott was a fluent and vigorous talker, with clear good sense and presence.

²¹ NMM / KEL / 109: Kelly, Sir John Donald, Admiral of The Fleet, 1871-1936: 1931 C-in-C, Atlantic Fleet. Papers on the aftermath of the Invergordon mutiny, including Kelly's report on the state of discipline in the Atlantic Fleet. Copies of reports of proceedings of the fleet at Invergordon. Letters from Keyes, Field, Lord Stanhope and A.V. Alexander.

²² *ibid.*

As the movement extended into its second day, more and more men began to waver, but eventually, by the evening of Wednesday 16 September (the 4th day) the crew of the first ship that refused orders resumed work and thus ended the mutiny.

Victimization and cover-up

Just after the strike, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Austen Chamberlain, said in Parliament that men involved would not be victimized. Pay cuts were revised on the recommendation of the Admiralty,²³ for fear of further protest action: cuts were restricted to a maximum of 10% for all ratings. The government realized giving publicity to the mutiny would have been counterproductive: in the media they avoided the word “mutiny” as carefully as did sailors. The government was worried at the shock a mutiny on such a scale would produce in Britain and around the world. It could not allow the Admiralty to set up an official investigation and court-martial seamen.²⁴ All party leaders in Parliament agreed not to press the government for any details of the mutiny.

Yet, despite what had been promised in Parliament, there was victimization: during the return journey to home ports, investigations were made, lists were compiled of men who were considered to have been the “ringleaders”:²⁵ two dozen men were arbitrarily dismissed just after the general election, on the ground that they had continued agitation on returning to their home port. Overall some 120 men were discharged in the following weeks.

²³ NA / ADM 1/8753/214: Proposal by Vice-Admiral Boyle for the institution of a committee to enquire into conditions in the Navy which gave rise to the Invergordon mutiny in the Atlantic fleet, 1931.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ See: NA / KV 2 / 595: George ALLISON: Physical Description: with 1 photograph (latterly National Industrial Organiser of the Communist Party of Great Britain, he was a Scottish miner who in the 1920s was the British representative on the Executive of the Red Trade Union International in Moscow and of the Profintern. In 1931, in the wake of the Invergordon Mutiny, he was arrested and later imprisoned for inciting RN sailors to mutiny. Evidence on the file suggests that in the 1930s he was involved in undercover work for the Communist Party linked to espionage). NA / KV 2 / 2324: Frederick Bayes COPEMAN, 1938-48. He was one of the leaders of the Invergordon Mutiny in 1931. Discharged from the Navy, he later commanded the British Battalion in the Spanish Civil War. He left the Communist Party in 1939.

Reports from Security services and senior officers reveal anti-communist/anti-union paranoia,²⁶ attempting to establish links between the lower-deck agitation and the labour movement; for instance, when ships returned to their naval base, intelligence services believed agitation would continue, that major demonstrations were planned and that naval ports and the Invergordon fleet had been infiltrated by communist agents in the view of organizing sedition. Special surveillance of some 120 seamen (blacklisted) was done by MI5 for well over a year after the mutiny.

Conclusion: The Admiralty's lack of awareness

For ratings, Invergordon was a strike "like the miners": men refused to put to sea because their wages had been cut without notice. So, a strong belief among them that strike action was not considered mutiny, and they felt it was grounded, justified. Most seamen were not driven by socialist ideas:²⁷ they were reasonable, moderate, non-violent and sincere.

Invergordon can be compared to the Spithead mutiny of 1797, when all the ships of the Channel Fleet mutinied against the pay and conditions of service: there were no victims and no one was brought before a court martial as it was considered that the men were justified in their complaints. Both also hint at matters the Royal Navy has always preferred to hush up since the early days of sail and the feeling of a community memory which feeds partly on the seamen's sense of belonging to a group, a class.

After Invergordon, the tense social, economic, political circumstances of the time encouraged the government and Parliament to force the Admiralty to hush the matter up as if nothing had happened. However, the Admiralty archives and other naval documents reveal that, behind the scenes, responsibility for the mutiny was a hotly contested issue: each party involved (Cabinet, Board of Admiralty, Admiral Tomkinson – the commanding officer of Atlantic Fleet-, captains, officers, seamen) put the blame on the other.

²⁶ NA / KV 4 / 129 -130: Appreciative letters from and to the Security Service, including one letter, dated November 1931, conveys the thanks of the Admiralty for the 'excellent work performed by MI5 during the recent unrest in the Royal Navy' ie. the Invergordon Mutiny

²⁷ Contrary to communist propaganda that hails Invergordon as a memorable fight between labour, the government and political institutions.

Overall, Invergordon's significance lies in a breakdown in communication in the Navy, and more particularly, between the Admiralty and seamen. Mutual misunderstanding led to the strike and the Admiralty's erratic response to it.

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