

**“It ain’t numbers, it’s quality”:
A literature review of the development of the battlecruiser in the Royal
Navy**

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The battlecruiser, developed in the early years of the twentieth century, had a short and somewhat inglorious history. The first battlecruiser, HMS *Invincible* was laid down on 2 April 1906 and launched on 13 April 1907. She was commissioned into the Home Fleet of the Royal Navy on 20 March 1909. She was sunk on 31 May 1916 during the Battle of Jutland, the only fleet action of the First World War.¹ After the construction of the *Invincible* the Admiralty completed a total of 14 battlecruisers before 1918: three in the *Invincible* class (*Invincible*, *Indomitable* and *Inflexible*); three in the *Indefatigable* class (*Indefatigable*, *Australia* and *New Zealand*); two in the *Lion* class (*Lion* and *Princess Royal*); *Queen Mary*; *Tiger*; two in the *Renown* class (*Renown* and *Repulse*); and two in the *Courageous* class (*Courageous* and *Glorious*).²

Naval historians have fiercely contested the narrative around the development of the battlecruiser and, in particular, the role intended for the warship type, as we will see below. At issue are the ways in which it was intended that the battlecruiser should fit alongside wider Admiralty warfighting strategy; the extent to which the warship type was the brainchild of one man, Sir John ‘Jacky’ Fisher (First Sea Lord from 1904-1910 and again from 1914-1915),³ and competing readings of the available documentary evidence leading to some very stark differences of interpretation.

This review examines: the literature around the development of the battlecruiser concept and of the initial *Invincible* class, including the technical developments which pushed towards the genesis of the warship type; the contested discussion around the intended role of the battlecruiser, including the role of Fisher and the Admiralty more generally; the verdict on the effectiveness of the battlecruiser; and a summary of the key historiographical issues evidenced across the literature. We conclude with some remarks on the debates in the extant literature.

It is worth noting that elements of the battlecruiser debate overlap with the wider development of the *Dreadnought*, the first all-big gun battleship. The *Dreadnought* was laid down on 2 October 1905 and commissioned into service on 2 December 1906, which is pre-dating *Invincible* by some months.⁴ We will, inevitably, touch on some issues which were common to both vessels, such as the focus on long range gunnery and speed,⁵ but will attempt to separate out those issues which are peculiar to the development and employment of the

¹ Siegfried Breyer, *Battleships and Battle Cruisers 1905-1970* (Macdonald, 1973), pp115-116.

² John Roberts, *Battlecruisers* (Caxton Editions, 1997), p7.

³ ‘Fisher, John Arbuthnot’, *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography, Volume I: A-F* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p1006.

⁴ Breyer, *op. cit.*, p113.

⁵ John Brooks, ‘Dreadnought: Blunder, or Stroke of Genius’, *War in History*, 14(2) (2007), pp164.

battlecruiser, rather than turn this current work into a general review of British capital ship development before 1914.

Genesis of the battlecruiser

Roberts traces the origins of the battlecruiser to the requirement to meet a need which was quite separate from the development of the *Dreadnought* battleship: that is, a ship able to defeat any existing cruiser and to be able to hunt down and neutralise enemy armed merchant vessels.⁶ The characteristics of the type drew, *inter alia*, on the experiences of the Russo-Japanese war and also reflected traditional roles of the older armoured cruiser type. As Beyer describes: reconnaissance, pursuit or covering a retreat and, in appropriate circumstances, participation in an engagement.⁷ The role of armoured cruisers was to support battleships in the line, not to fight on their own terms.⁸ Kowner notes that the experience of the Japanese fleet at the battle of Tsushima (May 1905) demonstrated the importance of speed and long-range gunnery, but also that armoured cruisers were able to perform a role in the line of battle when they were able to out-pace opposing battleships.⁹ Marder also concludes that the Japanese use of armoured cruisers as ‘capital ships’ at Tsushima, albeit manoeuvred separately from the battleships, further blurred the line between these major ship types.¹⁰

The *Invincible* was designed (by the Admiralty Committee on Designs) to displace 17,200 tons, for a maximum speed of 25 knots and to carry eight 12 inch guns.¹¹ In other words, *Invincible* displaced only around 1000 tons less than the battleship *Dreadnought*, carried only two fewer 12 inch main guns, but had a maximum belt armour thickness of only 6 inches (comparable to an armoured cruiser) as opposed to 11 inches on the *Dreadnought*.¹² There was a conscious decision with *Invincible* to trade armour protection for speed.¹³

Marder presents what has become the classic exposition of the intent behind the development of the *Invincible*. Marder’s argument is essentially teleological; seeing the development of both *Dreadnought* and *Invincible* as inevitable evolutions of the pre-dreadnought battleship and armoured cruiser respectively.¹⁴ Marder identifies three roles for the new ship: reconnaissance, with the ability to overcome an enemy’s traditional armoured cruisers; to deal with fast commerce raiders, in particular new German liners, which the Admiralty knew had been designed to carry guns in time of war; and to operate as a ‘fast wing’ for the battle fleet during a general action.¹⁵ Seligmann supports Marder’s conclusion that the battlecruiser’s main role was to counter German high speed auxiliary cruisers.¹⁶

⁶ Roberts, *op. cit.*, p10.

⁷ Beyer, *op. cit.*, p48.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Rotem Kowner, *Tsushima* (Oxford University Press, 2022), p173.

¹⁰ Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: Volume I, The Road to War 1904-1914* (Seaforth, 2021), p45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p44.

¹² Beyer, *op. cit.*, pp115-117.

¹³ Jon T. Sumida, ‘British Capital Ship Design and Fire Control in the Dreadnought Era: Sir John Fisher, Arthur Hungerford Pollen, and the Battle Cruiser’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 51(2) (1979), p216.

¹⁴ Marder, *op. cit.*, p44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Matthew S. Seligman, ‘New Weapons for New Targets: Sir John Fisher, the Threat from Germany, and the Building of HMS Dreadnought and HMS Invincible, 1902-1907’, *The International History Review*, 30(2) (2008), p317.

Like the *Dreadnought*, Fisher was the driving force behind the *Invincible* and also, like the *Dreadnought*, it was designed around the need for speed and the attendant tactical advantages that speed would bring (recognising, for example, the role speed played in the Japanese victory at Tsushima by allowing the Japanese fleet to cross the Russian ‘T’); the desirability of long-range gunnery to counter the threat of torpedoes; and a single calibre main armament, which aided accuracy in salvo shooting.¹⁷ Marder does, however, note that dissenting views noted, at the time of the development of *Invincible* that other ships were equally capable of fulfilling, at least the proposed scouting role.¹⁸

Mackay goes further than Marder in describing Fisher’s authorship both in the design of the *Invincible* and in consideration of the role of the battlecruiser.¹⁹ He argues that Fisher’s role, as Chairman of the Committee on Designs, was pivotal and that the resulting vessel was very much a product of Fisher’s prejudices. These were: long range gunnery, to stay out of the range of torpedoes; a single calibre of main gun to reduce ammunition handling complications; and speed to control the range and nature of engagements.²⁰ Goldrick observes that this combination of qualities provided for a platform which was an effective response to the perceived threat posed by French and Russian armoured cruisers to British imperial commercial interests.²¹

In a further development from Marder’s account of the development of the *Invincible*, Mackay notes Fisher’s contention that the battlecruiser was the more powerful vessel, compared to the battleship, because its speed would mean that no battleship could contend with its ability to control the range of an engagement.²² Herein, for Mackay, lies one of the key issues and, he contends, one of Fisher’s gravest mistakes. The fact that *Invincible* was armed with battleship calibre guns meant that the distinction between battlecruiser and battleship was less marked than the distinction between armoured cruiser and battleship and conflation of the roles therefore more likely.²³

Like Marder, Massie also draws a direct line of evolution from the armoured cruiser to the battlecruiser and traces Fisher’s interest in the ‘ultimate’ armoured cruiser to 1902 when, as Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, he began to conceive of an armoured cruiser which was capable of defeating any other similar vessel in existence. This hypothetical vessel was christened HMS *Perfection* by Fisher.²⁴ Like Marder and Mackay, Massie sees Fisher’s personal vision as the driving force for the development of the *Invincible* and her sisters, with the overweening desire to build the ultimate cruiser, without properly thinking through the consequences of the new ship’s capabilities or having a strategic purpose that could be fulfilled *only* by the development of a new warship type. In other words, all of the roles identified by Marder were necessary to be fulfilled, but could they only be fulfilled by a battlecruiser? Massie concludes that both the nomenclature and the design doomed the battlecruiser: a vessel that looked like a battleship and was armed like a battleship would, inevitably, be required to fight like a battleship.²⁵ “Like Sleeping Beauty,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp58-59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p69.

¹⁹ Ruddock F. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Clarendon Press, 1973), pp321-326.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p322.

²¹ James Goldrick, ‘The Problems of Modern Naval History’, *The Great Circle*, 18(1) (1996), pp51.

²² Mackay, *op. cit.*, p324.

²³ *Ibid.*, p325.

²⁴ Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming of the Great War* (Pimlico, 2004), p492.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p495.

for whom life was serene as long as she stayed away from spindles, the *Invincible* and her sisters could lead happy lives as long as they stayed away from battleships.”²⁶ Whatever the role may have been planned to be, Marder concludes that confusion about actual employment was inevitable.

This confusion may not, however, have been as real as Massie contends. Whether or not *Invincible* and her sisters were capable of contesting enemy battleships is one thing, whether or not the Admiralty thought they were so capable is another. As early as 1908, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Tweedmouth, was referring to the ships as ‘cruiser-battleships’ and intentionally brigading the *Invincibles* together as part of a ‘first-class fleet of battleships.’²⁷ At the very least, there appear to have been differing perceptions of the role to be fulfilled by the *Invincibles*.

Revisionist and post-revisionist historiography

More recently, Marder’s conclusions, broadly accepted as noted above, have been fundamentally challenged, in particular by Charles Fairbanks Jr, Jon Tetsuro Sumida and Nicholas Lambert.

Sumida²⁸ and Fairbanks²⁹ challenge Marder’s core theses on four grounds. First that the development of the *Invincible* (and, because of their shared genetic material, *Dreadnought*) was driven by gunnery technology; second, they argue that Fisher’s real intention was not to engineer a *Dreadnought* revolution, but an *Invincible* revolution and that he saw the battlecruiser as the superior vessel and envisaged a Royal Navy constructed around battlecruisers as the main strike force; third, that this focus on battlecruisers was driven by primarily financial considerations; and fourth, that Fisher conceived of the main threat to Britain’s security as being from France and Russia, not Germany, and that therefore the *Invincible* and her sisters were intended to counter those countries’ armoured cruiser threat.

Fairbanks contends that Marder’s implied belief that the *Dreadnought* (and, by implication, the *Invincible*) ‘burst forth fully formed’ was based on a failure to understand the technology involved in long-range gunnery.³⁰ Rather than Marder’s ‘almost teleological’³¹ belief that *Dreadnought* and *Invincible* were the inevitable results of improvements in long range gunnery and fire-control (which it is argued, in fact, post-dated the new ships) Fairbanks argues that there was, in fact, little advantage in a homogenous armament and that long-range gunnery was neither desirable nor especially effective.³² He further questions the inevitability of all-big gun armed ships as no other country (in particular France or Russia, which he frames as the main rivals to Britain) was, at the time, proposing similar vessels.³³ Sumida similarly dismisses Marder’s conclusion that the main object of Fisher’s strategic intent was the containment of the German navy, preferring the view that France and Russia were

²⁶ Ibid., p493.

²⁷ HL Deb 18 March 1908, vol. 186, col. 527. Available at: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1908/mar/18/the-navy>. (Accessed: 31 December 2022)

²⁸ Jon T. Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy* (Naval Institute Press, 1993).

²⁹ Charles H. Fairbanks Jr, ‘The Origins of the Dreadnought Revolution: A Historiographical Essay’, *The International History Review*, 13(2) (1991), pp246-272.

³⁰ Ibid., p251.

³¹ Ibid., p254.

³² Ibid., p252.

³³ Ibid., p253.

perceived as the main threat.³⁴ Ultimately, Fairbanks rejects this element of Marder's account as 'Whig' history, reflecting an uncritical belief in inevitable historical progress.³⁵ But throughout Fairbanks' criticisms of Marder on this aspect, one is left with a slightly unsatisfactory conclusion, which is that Fisher (who is presented as the uncontested author of the all-big gun revolution) pursued the approach simply because he *could* or for other reasons that are left unclear.

Both Sumida and Fairbanks further argue that Fisher's preference was a capital ship fleet built around the battlecruiser, partly because it was (in Fisher's view) the superior fighting ship and because such a fleet would better accommodate pressures on public spending. On the first point, Sumida's argument (echoed by Fairbanks) is in essence that Fisher initially favoured an all-cruiser force structure, as the most effective means of achieving his (and presumably the Admiralty's) strategic aims. But having failed to secure this vision directly set about achieving it indirectly by merging the armoured cruiser and battleship in a 'fusion' vessel: the battlecruiser.³⁶ Sumida sees the three planned *Courageous* class vessels as the apotheosis of Fisher's 'fusion' vessel; fast, heavily armed and lightly armoured,³⁷ with *Courageous* and *Glorious* carrying four 15 inch guns and *Furious* (if she had been completed as a battlecruiser) a slightly improbable pair of 18 inch guns.³⁸

Sumida takes Fairbanks' challenge to Marder's account of the development of the battlecruiser further. The essence of Sumida's argument is that Fisher was a willing accomplice in the drive by the British Government (and therefore the Admiralty) to reduce naval expenditure. The battlecruiser was an elegant solution to the conundrum of how to project naval power in a potentially multi-theatre conflict³⁹ at the same time allowing the Admiralty to save money. For Fisher, Sumida argues, not only was the battlecruiser the superior fighting ship, but it enabled the Royal Navy to maximise its fighting power through a smaller fleet of more powerful vessels: '[t]he best is the cheapest...It ain't numbers, it's quality'.⁴⁰

Lambert takes the challenge to Marder's account of the development of the battlecruiser a stage further. He takes the same view as Sumida on the underlying driving forces behind the development of *Invincible*: a fiscal squeeze⁴¹ (naval policy determined by primarily by finances) and the need to confront the threat from French and Russian armoured cruisers interdicting British commercial shipping.⁴² Fisher was appointed First Sea Lord, Lambert contends, precisely because he was both willing and able to secure financial savings and also because he was capable of a revolutionary re-conception of British naval strategy.⁴³ Lambert contends that previous accounts of the development of the battlecruiser were framed by the

³⁴ Jon T. Sumida, 'Demythologizing the Fisher Era: the Role of Change in Historical Method', *Militär-geschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 59 (2000), pp175.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p254.

³⁶ Sumida, *Naval Supremacy*, *op. cit.*, p58.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p60.

³⁸ Breyer, *op. cit.*, p162.

³⁹ Fairbanks, *op. cit.*, p267.

⁴⁰ Fisher, quoted in Sumida, *Naval Supremacy*, *op. cit.*, p159.

⁴¹ Nicholas A. Lambert, 'Righting the Scholarship: The Battle-Cruiser in History and Historiography', *The Historical Journal*, 58(1) (2015), p288.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p280.

⁴³ Nicholas A. Lambert, 'Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904-1909', *The Journal of Military History*, 59 (1995), p641.

Mahanian concept of naval strategy: control of the sea by elimination of the opponent's main fighting force. Fisher, Lambert argues, proposed an entirely different approach to the projection of naval power, based on the use of battlecruisers to secure Imperial trade and commercial shipping, while adopting a model of 'flotilla defence' to protect the British Isles from invasion.⁴⁴ Naval strategy should not be seen, *pace* Marder, as being independent of technology and economics: Lambert argues that these factors are inextricably linked.⁴⁵ The 'flotilla defence' model would be based on 'swarms' of flotilla craft (submarines and torpedo boats, in particular) denying the narrow seas around the British Isles to potential belligerents, thereby obviating the need for large numbers of capital ships to be devoted to home defence.⁴⁶ In any event, Lambert concludes, the development of the submarine and the torpedo made the maintenance of a fleet of capital ships in the North Sea an untenable proposition.⁴⁷

For Lambert, therefore, the development of the battlecruiser has to be seen not as an inevitable development of the armoured cruiser, but as part of a decisive break from the traditional, Mahanian, conception of naval strategy. Battlecruisers were not intended, as Marder had argued, to fulfil roles complementary to a fleet of battleships, but as a replacement for battleships in a force structure built around mutual denial of the seas around the British Isles and high speed, heavily armed, ocean-going force able to secure Britain's global interests. No longer was the Royal Navy seeking to bring an enemy to decisive action; the ends of strategy were now entirely different.⁴⁸

Sumida, Fairbanks and Lambert's analysis of the evidence, and their conclusion, is not without its critics. Bell, Morgan-Owen and Seligmann have challenged the methodology of the revisionists, their deployment of the evidence and their conclusions.

Bell challenges both Sumida and Lambert on methodological grounds. He maintains that both authors impute to Fisher a level of influence that was beyond his ability to exercise. Bell points out that much of the strategy with which Fisher is credited could only have been developed while he was *not* First Sea Lord. Bell contends that Sumida and Lambert sidestep this potential problem by concentrating on Fisher's informal influence on Churchill (in particular) as First Lord of the Admiralty.⁴⁹ Sumida and Lambert are further criticised for constructing their cases on the basis of what, by implication, they conclude Fisher wanted to achieve, rather than being grounded in a rigorous reading of the evidence. This approach conflates, for example, Churchill's agreement of the battlecruiser building programme with agreement of the role for battlecruisers they argue Fisher wanted to pursue.⁵⁰ Bell's criticisms of Sumida and Lambert's methodology are trenchant: he argues that both fall into the trap of believing that new evidence must, almost inevitably, be better evidence. In seeking to foreground their reading of archival material, they unnecessarily dismiss competing scholarship.⁵¹

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p648.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p646.

⁴⁶ Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (University of South Carolina Press, 2002), p123.

⁴⁷ Lambert, *Flotilla Defence*, *op. cit.*, p650.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p660.

⁴⁹ Christopher M. Bell, 'The Myth of a Naval Revolution by Proxy: Lord Fisher's Influence on Winston Churchill's Naval Policy, 1911-1914', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 38(7) (2015), p1029.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p1031.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p1028.

Morgan-Owen dismisses the foundations Lambert's arguments, that is that Admiralty plans were built on the notion of flotilla defence. Morgan-Owen argues that Lambert misreads the evidence. Admiralty plans did not, in actuality, reflect the neat division of force structure posited by Lambert. Anti-invasion planning continued, even after 1905, to include capital ships as part of the Home Fleet. Fisher did not subscribe to the 'mutual sea denial' implicit in the flotilla defence model because he did not see any reason to deny the Royal Navy use of the North Sea and the English Channel.⁵² The use of torpedo boats to interdict an invasion fleet was not new to Fisher; it had been part of Admiralty planning since 1889.⁵³ In any event, the limitations of the potential flotilla defence model were exposed by the German battlecruiser raid on the English east coast in 1914.⁵⁴ And, finally, Admiralty plans were based on both *Dreadnought* and *Invincible* forming part of the Home Fleet⁵⁵ and for the 1st Cruiser Squadron (including *Invincible* and her two sisters) supporting destroyers in maintaining a blockade of Germany.⁵⁶

Conclusions and disputed historiography

The debate across the literature, in particular that involving Bell and Lambert, is more than a debate about competing interpretations of an established body of facts. In a series of articles, Bell and Lambert criticise not only their respective findings, but the rigour of each other's historical method. In defending Marder, Bell argues that both Sumida and Lambert rely on a selective reading of the evidence in order to construct their alternative narratives. Furthermore, argues Bell, both Lambert and Sumida rely on their own interpretations of what Fisher planned, rather than the archival record *per se*. This, he argues, makes their arguments fundamentally flawed.⁵⁷ Lambert is also criticised for relying too much on Fisher's influence on Churchill in the immediate run up to war.⁵⁸ Seligmann is equally robust in his criticism of Lambert, arguing that the absence of an articulated approach in the Admiralty records based on flotilla defence should be taken as *prima facie* evidence that such a strategy did not exist not, as he claims Lambert concludes, as evidence that the plans in the archival record are either not the real plans or are, in some sense, wrong. Seligmann likens Lambert's approach to history by 'conspiracy theory.'⁵⁹

These are important issues and go to the heart of the nature of any historical debate. Both Bell and Lambert claim the methodological high ground and profess a mastery of the source material. Both authors are equally certain of their conclusions. The weaknesses in the arguments advanced by both Lambert and Sumida are two-fold: what appears to be an over-reliance on motivations they ascribe to Fisher, which arguably go beyond the influence even a First Sea Lord might exert; and a willingness to fill in the gaps in the archival record with *post hoc* rationalisation. It may be that decision making processes are more prosaic that either Sumida or Lambert feel able to admit. But it may be that the methodological dispute misses

⁵² David G. Morgan-Owen, "'History is a Record of Exploded Ideas': Sir John Fisher and Home Defence, 1904-10", *The International History Review*, 36(3) (2014), p553.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p557.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p561.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p563

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p567.

⁵⁷ Bell, *Myth, op. cit.*, p1042.

⁵⁸ Christopher M. Bell, 'Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution Reconsidered: Winston Churchill at the Admiralty, 1911-1914', *War in History*, 18(3) (2011), p355.

⁵⁹ Matthew S. Seligman, 'Naval History by Conspiracy Theory: The British Admiralty before the First World War and the Methodology of Revisionism', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 38(7) (2015), p973.

the point. Whatever intention behind the development of *Invincible*, some things are clear from the literature.

The first is that whatever strategic and tactical advantage *Invincible* offered was bound to be short-lived. The technology was easily copied.⁶⁰ The first German battlecruiser *Von der Tann* was laid down on 21 March 1908, a year before *Invincible* was commissioned.⁶¹ Second, whatever Fisher's authorship of *Invincible* and her contemporaries, he saw beyond warship types to conceive of capability requirements and how these might be filled. This, if nothing else, was a revolutionary step.⁶² Third, whatever the intention, the Royal Navy's battlecruiser force did exactly what Marder argued it was created to achieve. *Invincible* and *Inflexible* were employed successfully to counter the German commerce-raiding armoured cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* at the Falkland Islands.⁶³ A job they performed perfectly. And, again as Marder argued, the Royal Navy's battlecruisers were employed as the 'fast wing' of the Grand Fleet at the Battle of Jutland. That this ended in tragedy was a failure in tactics (not taking advantage of the speed of the ships and fighting them as part of the main battleline) and of design (inadequate flash protection for the ships' magazines).⁶⁴

In the end, debates about intent are subordinated to the actual practice in the war in which battlecruisers were employed and this may get to the heart of the matter. *Invincible* and her successors had no clear role. Their function was inevitably confused because of their design: this was their fatal flaw.

⁶⁰ Goldrick, *op. cit.*, p52.

⁶¹ Breyer, *op. cit.*, p269.

⁶² Goldrick, *op. cit.*, p52.

⁶³ Donald G. White, 'The Misapplication of a Weapons System: The Battle Cruiser as a Warship Type', *Naval War College Review*, 22(5) (1970), p48.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p53.

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