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## Patriotism and pageantry: representations of Britain's naval past at the Greenwich Night Pageant, 1933

*Emma Hanna*

Using the grounds of the Royal Naval College as its stage, in June 1933 the Greenwich Night Pageant presented a showcase of English history. Various tableaux, including the christening of Elizabeth I, Drake's arrival on the *Golden Hinde* and the funeral of Nelson were re-enacted by a cast of approximately 2,000 people. Accompanied by sea shanties and Sir Henry Wood's *Fantasia on British Sea Songs*, ten two-hour performances were seen by over 120,000 people, including prominent politicians, members of the aristocracy and senior members of the royal family. In terms of both its form and content, and particularly the personalities who created it, the production and reception of the Greenwich Night Pageant is an interesting case study that enables us to consider how representations of Britain's naval past featured in debates about the nature of national identity in an era of imperial decline and international instability.<sup>1</sup>

The history of pageantry in early twentieth-century Britain reveals much about the national understanding of the past and its relation to the present.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on the civic shows of the nineteenth century, and the German *Festspiele*, it was Louis Napoleon Parker who is considered to have invented the Edwardian pageant at Sherborne, Dorset, in 1905. Parker was a respected composer who had taken an interest in the English folk-song revival associated with Cecil Sharp and Ralph Vaughan Williams. He was an early disciple of Wagner, 'whose grandiose notions of a total theatre embodying the consciousness of a people he clearly sought to emulate.'<sup>3</sup> Parker was also inspired by William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement, which had regenerated interest in village culture.<sup>4</sup> After the success at Sherborne, Parker produced a number of large-scale pageants, for example at Warwick in 1906 and Dover in 1908. A pageant movement

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was soon created. Lots of other smaller pageants were held in Liverpool, Oxford and St Albans in 1907, and Chelsea, Cheltenham, Winchester and Pevensey in 1908. By the end of 1909, pageants had been staged at Bury St Edmunds, Colchester and York. Performed in open spaces, very often near historic monuments, pageants featured large casts of amateur actors and involved the work of local craftsmen. Gilbert Hudson's sizeable pageant at Pickering Castle, North Yorkshire, was staged in 1910 with the aim of attracting tourists to the area.

Pageants resembled chronicle plays where series of historical episodes were connected by prologues and epilogues, narrative and dramatic choruses, musical interludes and long parades.<sup>5</sup> Parker exported the pageant form to America during the First World War, where it thrived as a public spectacle under his disciple Percy Mackaye.<sup>6</sup> Pageants were performed on the Western Front, and in England pageants continued until the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> E. M. Forster scripted two – *Abinger Pageant* (1934) and *England's Pleasant Land* (1938) – which provided the inspiration for the Poyntz Hall pageant at the centre of Virginia Woolf's novel *Between the Acts* (1941). Besides Parker, the most well-known pageant makers were Frank Lascelles, Arthur Bryant and Mary Kelly. Kelly's *How to Make a Pageant* was published in 1936, and the book described the usual form of a pageant – having a 'Spirit of the Ages' or 'Father Time' who narrates the episodes. This type of pageant 'was by its very nature euphoric. The community that is any given pageant's subject is self-evidently alive and well at the end of the story and proudly re-enacting iconic episodes from its own past.'<sup>8</sup> Kelly felt it was best 'to end on a note of joy or hope', since to her the pageant was a commitment to the inevitability of progress. Pageants were therefore adaptable to progressive causes, for example E. M. Forster's liberal environmentalism and Cicely Hamilton's suffragette play, *A Pageant of Great Women*, performed in 1910.<sup>9</sup>

However, the majority of pageants were saturated with references to the Tudor period. Most productions contained a Queen Elizabeth scene and Kelly's instructions are most detailed on the casting of the queen as the most important role. Connections between pageantry and imperialism are also very evident in the representation of Elizabeth I as Gloriana, the founder of the British Empire. The Greenwich Night Pageant was indeed dominated by Elizabeth and the hero Drake, and as recently as 1930 the Aldershot tattoo had incorporated a pageant of Elizabeth I addressing her troops at Tilbury. Dobson has observed that 'in lieu of having a formally recognised national costume in which to dress up on special occasions, the English simply resorted to farthingales and doublet and hose as an

instinctive default setting'.<sup>10</sup> The image of Elizabeth I as Gloriana had been emphasised in Parker's play at the Haymarket Theatre – *Drake: A Pageant Play in Three Acts* (1912) – which was successfully revived after the outbreak of the First World War. During the 1930s, a time of tumultuous social, political and economic challenges both at home and abroad, it appeared that 'Elizabeth's victory in 1588 still marked a convenient happy ending, the point after which there were to be no defining wars for national survival'.<sup>11</sup>

By the early 1930s, Arthur Bryant was one of the most successful pageant producers of interwar Britain.<sup>12</sup> The son of a courtier to the royal family, Bryant was an established historian, broadcaster and journalist who venerated order, place, ritual and historic tradition.<sup>13</sup> From the mid-1920s, he was concerned that the 'atrophying of patriotism' after the First World War constituted a serious threat to Britain's national character, unity and independence, and he aimed through his work to maintain the patriotism of 'ordinary people'.<sup>14</sup> It was perhaps Bryant's pageant at Hyde Park in 1932 which brought his talents as a pageant maker to the attention of Barry Domvile and his wife Alexandrina. Domvile had been born at the Royal Naval College in 1878 while his father, Admiral Sir Compton Domvile, served as Captain of the College. After a series of appointments both at sea and on land, including as a naval aide-de-camp to Queen Victoria (1888), Compton Domvile was appointed Director of Naval Ordnance (1891–4). Barry Domvile equalled his father's illustrious career path. Until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, he was Assistant Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence, then commanded destroyers, flotilla leaders and cruisers in the Harwich Force for the duration of the conflict. Between 1919 and 1922, Domvile was Assistant Director and Director of Plans (Policy Division) of the Admiralty Naval Staff, and then Director of Naval Intelligence (1927–30), going on to command the Third Cruiser Squadron, Mediterranean Fleet (1930–1).

Domvile was reaching the end of a distinguished naval career when he was appointed President of the Royal Naval College in 1932. On their arrival, Domvile and his German-born wife Alexandrina appear to have found the Royal Naval College, and the local area of Greenwich, lacking in atmosphere. His diaries allude to the college as an institution which was regarded as something of a backwater, where the staff had settled into factions resulting in spats and infighting. Domvile's appointment as president of the college was not met with universal approval, and the couple made every effort to liaise with local politicians to garner support for the

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pageant. Accompanied by the town clerk, the Lord and Lady Mayoress of Greenwich paid regular visits to the college from September 1932. Domvile recorded that 'they were terrible excited about the pageant [the Mayoress] said there would be great competition for [the role of] Q[ueen] E[lizabeth]'.<sup>15</sup> The Domviles appeared in one of many public meetings on 2 November 1932 in Borough Hall where they and Bryant addressed the audience about the event.<sup>16</sup> The excitement generated around the pageant opened up the Royal Naval College. Domvile commented that people 'were too touching about our influence here – the only time the college has been accessible'.<sup>17</sup>

Early plans laid out by Domvile in 1932 detailed that '[t]he Pageant will be largely Naval in character and is intended to show the interest displayed by the various Sovereigns in Naval affairs and the gradual development of the Navy under their auspices'.<sup>18</sup> Of the Royal Naval College, Domvile said that

the setting provided for such a show is very nearly ideal, and the History of Greenwich is the history of England, because a Palace has stood on this site since the 15th century. Both King Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were born at Greenwich, and to Greenwich came Sir Francis Drake in his famous GOLDEN HIND [*sic*] to make his bow to his queen. From the Painted Chamber at Greenwich Nelson's coffin was borne down to the river to be carried to its final resting place in St Paul's ... Apart from this, the National Maritime Museum with its valuable and intensely interesting treasures will be inaugurated shortly ... in the Queen's House at Greenwich.<sup>19</sup>

Domvile's diary records that, after a walk around the local area at Greenwich in July 1932, he had come to the conclusion that 'B[ryant] would do for my pageant – he is tremendously enthusiastic'.<sup>20</sup> Bryant was appointed by the Domviles under the auspices of the Greenwich Night Pageant Company Limited, and was offered payment of £400 (including expenses) – around £15,000 in today's money – to be the pageant's producer.<sup>21</sup> Bryant was a regular guest of the Domviles at Greenwich, and pageant business would very often be discussed after a lunch in the president's house and on walks in the college grounds. The plans for the event appear to have developed organically. In August 1932, Domvile records that there were discussions about having the principal actors 'using [the] river as well and the central path in the square'.<sup>22</sup> The first press interview the Domviles gave about the pageant was given to the *Kentish Mercury* in October 1932.<sup>23</sup>

Domvile was heavily involved with the production of the pageant, a

little too heavily at times for Bryant whose correspondence indicates that the two men came to blows on a number of occasions. It was Domville who came up with the idea of using the pensioners and their dreams as narrators of the pageant, and he also advised Bryant that '[l]ocal opinion will be very disappointed if you do not manage to work in Wolfe'.<sup>24</sup> Domville's relations with the college's leading historian, Professor Geoffrey Callender, appear to have been particularly strained. Domville originally intended that Bryant would work on the pageant with Callender.<sup>25</sup> Bryant visited Callender at Greenwich for meetings in September 1932, and Domville records that Bryant 'had had a successful interview [with Callender] – so he said'.<sup>26</sup> However, Domville and Callender were not to be close colleagues. In November 1932, his diary records in relation to pageant business that 'I see that the Professor has been busy poisoning people's minds'.<sup>27</sup> Bryant corresponded with Callender but this working relationship appears to peter out as Callender withdrew from discussions about the pageant due to his 'dislike of the limelight'.<sup>28</sup>

However, it was Domville's wife, Alexandrina Domville (née von der Heydt) who did the majority of the pageant's organisation. Domville's diary records that Alexandrina – to whom he refers to 'Pudd' – was working very hard on many aspects of the event. Domville's diary is a fascinating insight into the couple's domestic life, and it becomes clearer from his own private words that Alexandrina was in fact the driving force behind the pageant as she was in many other areas of their life together. In August 1932, he described Alexandrina's business visits to London, and that 'she has many irons in the fire'.<sup>29</sup> As secretary of the Greenwich Night Pageant Company, established in 1932, Alexandrina attended meetings to publicise the pageant and garner local support, as well as hosting the many conferences required at the naval college. Nevertheless, Mrs Domville is rarely mentioned in the cuttings and documents which record the planning and delivery of the pageant. Domville's diaries are more forthcoming. By October 1932, Domville said of his office that his wife was 'setting up her Pageant Kingdom in there'.<sup>30</sup> He records that 'Pudd has her table set in the corner of my office and I can watch my darling at work – she had some odd visitors in the course of the day – a grocer – a lady who wishes to supply cushions to the pageant and a keen actor from a printer's shop'.<sup>31</sup> Alexandrina attended a number of society gatherings to spread the word about the pageant.<sup>32</sup> Domville noted that was always 'working – working – working. She is a marvel'.<sup>33</sup> The workload increased at the end of 1932, and Domville describes that 'Pudd has many things to do – the work is getting too much for her'.<sup>34</sup> In February

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1933, Alexandrina made a speech about the pageant at a Scout concert in St Alfege Hall, and was asked if she would consider being a borough councillor. Domville recalled that she was 'terribly elated. I must say she has done marvels with the people here'.<sup>35</sup>

The Greenwich Night Pageant demonstrates that the 'cult of the navy' – the ways in which the navy and the sea were celebrated in the decades before 1914 – had retained its strength in the interwar period.<sup>36</sup> Like the fleet reviews and launches of warships, the Greenwich Night Pageant was a spectacle of past power and pride where tradition and claims to the sea were staged to domestic and foreign audiences. Ritual and theatre merged with power and politics, and the implications of such a public entertainment show how the navy and the sea remained important metaphors of Britishness in the interwar period, enabling us to examine contemporary attitudes to the concepts of nation and empire.<sup>37</sup> Historians such as George Mosse and Hans-Ulrich Wehler have examined German national festivals and military spectacles as manoeuvres in the manipulation of the masses preceding the rise of the Nazis. In Britain, similar studies have been done which have interpreted public rituals as instruments of propaganda to induce imperialist sentiment and domestic consensus.<sup>38</sup>

It is also important to understand the context of the time in which the Greenwich Night Pageant took place. The early 1930s was a period of liminality, an extended period of international crisis in the aftermath of the First World War heightened by events in Germany. Pageants as 'rituals' were political mass spectacles used to overcome such crises, and the pageant movement 'was searching for origins, going back into history to construct a utopian vision of the future'.<sup>39</sup> Pageants as mass spectacles 'originated in a deep yearning for communal experience widespread in European culture at the turn of the century which stimulated the exploration of different kinds of fusion between theatre and ritual'. The events 'were conceived and intended as a bulwark against what was felt to be the evil consequences of industrialisation such as loss of solidarity, disintegration of society and disorder'.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Louis Parker believed the social aims of pageantry should be a 'festival of brotherhood in which all distinctions of whatever kind were sunk in common effort', and that it 're-awakened civic pride' and 'increased self-respect'.<sup>41</sup>

Pageantry dramatises the past as a form of representation and performance, of re-enactment that encourages a visceral experience of the past on physical and emotional levels.<sup>42</sup> There are two principle characteristic features of a pageant: it involves a 'communitarian ethos' where large numbers of people from the local community are actively involved, and it

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claims authenticity, meaning the importance of place, of being held where the original events occurred.<sup>43</sup> The cast of the Greenwich Night Pageant was vast. Approximately 2,500 local people acted, and many were drawn from various organisations including The Old Contemptibles Association and local youth and athletic groups.<sup>44</sup> Domville was particularly proud that so many local people were involved:

Greenwich has a splendid history and they want the rest of the world to remember it ... The whole borough has caught the enthusiasm of it. There will be 1,200 performers, and the great majority of them are Greenwich men and women. The Elizabethan crowd, with all its variety of yeomen, apprentices, gentry, strolling players and jugglers, will be made up mainly of Blackheath people.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the naval theatre of the 1930s 'was designed to affirm the unity of empire at a time when this unity was being challenged more than ever before'.<sup>46</sup> When Hitler's National Socialists came to power in January 1933 they embarked on a rapid programme of rearmament. This resulted in a rise in ceremonies and celebrations such as naval reviews and launches which became the prime sites of Nazi ritual.<sup>47</sup> A form of pageantry called *Thingspiel* or Thingplay was very popular in Germany from 1933. The plays featured national themes, subjects and ideologies, underpinned by the death and rebirth of a nation. It was enormously appealing at the time and was understood as a 'people's liturgy'.<sup>48</sup> In the context of the rise of Nazi Germany and its public pageantry, naval theatre reached a new climax in Britain in the 1930s. Jan Rüger has noted that 'the dual challenges of a rising rival on the Continent and a chronically overstretched empire abroad motivated a wave of renewed rituals which were designed to project confidence and continuity'.<sup>49</sup> The rise of public pageantry in Nazi Germany was mirrored by an increase in naval public theatre in Britain, but it should be underlined that this was not simply a right-wing phenomenon as the Popular Front staged its own pageants in Britain during the late 1930s.<sup>50</sup>

There had been voices which spoke against holding the pageant at Greenwich but the plans for the event were widely supported in the national press. The Greenwich Night Pageant was understood as a naval alternative to the Royal Air Force's annual display at Hendon, and the Army's tattoo at Aldershot, which only served to highlight the pageant's celebration of Britain's Naval heritage.<sup>51</sup> Greenwich certainly had the support of the Royal Navy, which was underlined when Earl Beatty paid a well-publicised visit to witness the last stages



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of dress rehearsals.<sup>52</sup> Beatty emphasised that Greenwich was ‘almost the birthplace of the Navy’, surrounded as it was by royal dockyards, and that he hoped the pageant would teach people about the navy’s history. However, Domvile was dissatisfied with Beatty’s comments, saying that it was ‘not a good speech – he would have done better to take the one I had written.’<sup>53</sup> Domvile, however, was very happy with the newspaper coverage of Beatty’s visit the following day.<sup>54</sup> He was, though, annoyed that some members of the college staff who were not working in support of the pageant came to Beatty’s reception, alluding to the division of colleagues who did or did not approve of the pageant’s production at the college.<sup>55</sup>

The Greenwich Night Pageant was heavily publicised and had the support of the king and many of the Domviles’ aristocratic friends. When his majesty ‘consented to become a patron’, Domvile wrote in his diary ‘He is a brick.’<sup>56</sup> The event appeared in 480 publications providing local, national and international coverage running to over 5000 column inches. The press were treated very well, and were transported to report on two dress rehearsals by riverboat. The revival of the Whitebait Ministerial Dinner, a nineteenth-century tradition where the cabinet travelled to Greenwich by boat, was scheduled for the opening night and this imbued the plans for the event with an added historical and ceremonial element.<sup>57</sup> In January 1933, it had been reported that the government would be treated to ‘the most romantic and historic dinner its members can ever have eaten.’<sup>58</sup> The article outlined the plans for the dinner and the pageant which were saturated in historical detail. The dinner would take place in the Painted Hall, designed by Wren and decorated by Sir William Thornhill, father-in-law to Hogarth, and where Nelson lay in state. The hall ‘will be floodlit, and the Cabinet will sit down to an old-time dinner such as Pepys himself, who, as Secretary for the Admiralty, lived in the Hospital, would have enjoyed’. The stage directions were a tantalising foretaste of the planned spectacle:

Silver-clad torch-bearers will light the Ministers from the river steps of the Hospital to the dining hall ... the Lord Mayor, Sir Percy Greenaway ... has been invited to come down by river in a naval launch. It is suggested that for the last half-mile of the journey he should transfer to a State barge and be rowed to the Hospital in the old style by liveried watermen, with the way lighted by searchlight from the banks ... The roads leading into the Hospital will be lined by pikemen in the uniform of Charles II, who built the Hospital in its present form. The organ, on which Dr Malcolm Sergeant will accompany the pageant, is the one which was played at Nelson’s funeral.<sup>59</sup>

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It was also mentioned that Sir Arthur Bryant was currently writing a biography of Pepys 'in the very house where the great diarist lived', and that during the pageant the part of Nelson would be played by Captain Archibald Graham 'who lost his right arm in the war'. Further details of a shopping week and carnival organised to coincide with the pageant were also given.<sup>60</sup> Work on the stand began with Haig and Dickinson on 13 January 1933.<sup>61</sup> By March, it was being reported that the pageant's grandstand would be 'the largest that has ever been put up in this country'. Accommodating 12,000 people, the construction was said to involve '30 miles of steel tubing and 15 miles of fire-proofed planking'.<sup>62</sup>

The Greenwich Night Pageant was open to all. The whitebait dinners were advertised widely and it was underlined that the restaurants would be fully licensed so 'there will be no reason why the Elizabethan scenes of the pageant should not be accompanied by Elizabethan cheerfulness'.<sup>63</sup> The pageant ticket office was close to Greenwich station, and the prices of seats ranged from 1s 6d to 12s 6d. A fish dinner was advertised in the Painted Hall at 5s 6d, approximately £10.17 today. All forms of public transport used to offer extra services to supply the demands of the pageant, and Empire Shopping Week was also held at this time.<sup>64</sup> An exhibition of Greenwich industries was also held nearby, to which those who attended the pageant would enjoy free entry. Much was made of highlighting the work and the products of factories in the area, as well as publicising the neighbourhood to potential residents.

The sense of place was key. The buildings of the Royal Naval College were used as a set, the colonnades acting as wings and the steps between as additional stage space. The event reeked of history. Many references were made not only to Tudor monarchs and the Palace of Placentia which had previously stood on the site, but to objects such as 'the Nelson relics'. This referred to the drums that were played at his funeral, which were brought back to Greenwich and played as if to summon up Nelson's spirit to the site where his body lay in state for three days in January 1806. However, the most striking, unique and effective part of the Greenwich Night Pageant was the use of the shadowgraph. A screen, 33ft wide and 120ft high was erected between the colonnades of the King William and Queen Mary buildings which allowed for the projection of large-scale lantern images. This system was invented by Dr B. P. Haigh, professor of applied mechanics at the college, and was of particular interest to the press because it was the first of its kind.

Perhaps taking some inspiration from the naval modelling techniques employed by British Instructional Films in the 1920s, models of ships were

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run along a small railway track in front of the lantern, at an angle which represented the approach and withdrawal of the vessels. Stencil slides were also used to project dates, for example, and the sea was conveyed by wave effects. But it was these technical elements of the Greenwich Night Pageant which made it both unusual and extremely challenging for Bryant and his team. He wrote that it 'is quite unlike the ordinary Pageant in its stage technique, and its production is much more the kind of work to which a producer of films is accustomed than a Pageant Producer'.<sup>65</sup> *Punch* magazine described the shadowgraph as 'entirely novel in the way of silhouettes, the undistorted movement of which across the screen is amazingly realistic'.<sup>66</sup> Images of ships, particularly sixteenth-century vessels, were the mainstay of the Greenwich Night Pageant. The imagery of ships and the sea is rich with symbolic meaning. Michel Foucault described ships as 'the greatest reserve of the imagination'. Their symbolic power as what he called 'heterotopias' signify that the vessels symbolically unite spaces or sites that would otherwise be seen as incompatible.<sup>67</sup> The Greenwich Night Pageant therefore underlined that the people and events hosted by Greenwich were at the centre of Britain's history, and that their heritage was inextricably linked with the sea and the vessels which sailed to establish a great empire.

However, the Greenwich Night Pageant also ventured into representations of the more recent past. A particularly striking scene took place just before the end, where the coming of war in 1914 is portrayed in a particularly dramatic fashion by 'robot soldiers' which echo Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). The stage directions detail that:

a beam of light reveals a company of armed men marching across the top of the steps. Their helmets are of steel and their faces are pointed and phosphorescent, while their uniforms gleam with slime. Their motions are not of humans, but of rigid automata ... another beam reveals their leader, who is Death, with a skull head and a white floating robe and riding a horse ... Amid the thunder of artillery and the rattle of machine guns, and the shrieking sound of flying steel ... sirens add to the inferno of noise.

You would not have seen that at Sherborne, and once again it gives us a window into the political and diplomatic undertones of the Greenwich Night Pageant. However, this appears to have been Bryant's idea. Domville wrote to him saying,

I have just read your epilogue ... I think it is magnificent: a splendid finale that will bring down the house and make your name as a Pageant Master, that is to say if the actors are prepared to perform. I have an unpleasant

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feeling that anything martial is not popular in Greenwich. However, the sooner they learn to become a bit more martial again, the better.<sup>68</sup>

In the run-up to the pageant tensions ran high. Domvile had tolerated weekly visits from the local mayor who insisted on 'meddling' with arrangements. They argued about publicity and the grandstand, and Domvile recorded that '[he] had already stopped the mayor sending off foolish letters – he is a bloody nuisance.'<sup>69</sup> Domvile's relations with Bryant, once so friendly, also suffered under the strain of staging the pageant. He complained '[t]hat wretched Bryant is once more in a state of panic – this time over traffic and dressing. He is an amazing fellow, lives his life in a series of crises.'<sup>70</sup> As the dress rehearsals were taking place, Domvile and Bryant had a series of rows by letter and in person, and Domvile was resigned that this disharmony 'was one of the things I must put up with for a pageant.'<sup>71</sup>

At 10pm on 16 June 1933, the Greenwich Night Pageant opened. Domvile recalled that the first night's audience 'were wild about the pageant ... Hailsham said he would not ask me to the Tattoo! ... we were overwhelmed with compliments ... There is no doubt it is a very great success.'<sup>72</sup> Approximately 80,000 people went to see the pageant over nine performances. Demand for tickets exceeded expectations and an additional performance was added, and 3,000 seats were left unreserved. The *Daily Mail's* account of the final performance gives an atmospheric taste of how the excitement built throughout the evening:

Two hours before 8pm, when the gates opened, long queues were formed. By 8.15pm every seat had been taken, and until 10 o'clock, when the pageant started, a continuous stream of people hurried up to the gates in a fruitless attempt at admission ... Those who crowded the grandstand last night were enthralled by the living pages of history which were unrolled one by one on the wide lawn, framed by the pillars of the naval college.<sup>73</sup>

Domvile was particularly pleased that instead of going to the producer, Bryant, 'all come to me' to lavish praise on the event.<sup>74</sup> The queen attended a performance on 24 June and 'arrived amidst great applause', but the king was absent 'because they were afraid of the damp.'<sup>75</sup> The pageant proved to be so popular there were calls to extend the run. Domvile's diary records that Lord Rothermere saw the pageant and 'decreed that it was to go on, and sent down a representative – a nasty piece of work, to make me a most tempting offer: that if I would prolong the pageant he would pay all expenses and leave me only profits. I returned a "no" in view of all the difficulties and the fact that I did not want to be exploited by the *Daily Mail*.'<sup>76</sup>

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The Greenwich Night Pageant was typical in the prominence it gave to the Tudor period. However, the pageant's version of British history ignited debate in the national press. In the House of Commons on 18 July 1933, Labour's Isaac Foot asked the First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Bolton Eyres Monsell, whether his permission had been sought in advance of the pageant. Foot also asked if the content of the performance had been submitted to him in advance for his approval, and if any public money had been used to fund the event. Eyres Monsell responded by underlining that the event was staged in aid of naval charities. He confirmed that the pageant had been given with his permission, that it had not been necessary for him to see the content in advance, and that no public money had been used. Foot continued to ask:

Can we have the assurance that the sanction of the Ministry will not be given in future to a pageant which, while purporting to show how the heritage of the sea had been built up, contemptuously dismissed all reference to the Protectorate or the Commonwealth, and to the supreme service to the British Navy rendered by the Great Protector, by Vane and by Colonel Robert Blake, who, in our own parish church, is described as the chief founder of England's naval supremacy?

Eyres Monsell replied that:

I hope the hon. Member will agree that the pageant as a whole was a beautiful representation of British history. If we hold it again, as I hope we may, I will make representations about what the hon. Member says. I consider that Blake was one of the greatest of our British Admirals.<sup>77</sup>

Bryant responded that it had purely been a matter of space, time and continuity.<sup>78</sup> He said 'the only dramatic episode in the great Admiral's life which we could have presented adequately was his funeral ... We chose Nelson's, and honoured Blake in the only way left to us by making him the central figure of our posters.'<sup>79</sup> Foot replied that while public duties had denied him the privilege of watching the pageant, he appreciated 'the beauty and the public spirit of the enterprise ... [but] regarded the presentation in one respect as a perversion of our national history.'<sup>80</sup>

The technological developments of the 1930s meant that owners of cine cameras could film pageants. While there is a rough sound recording of the pageant, only the Gaumont newsreel of Beatty's visit survives.<sup>81</sup> Film footage of the Greenwich Night Pageant has yet to be found. Domvile's diary records that several visits were made to Greenwich by various film companies, for example Gaumont Graphic in April 1933,<sup>82</sup> and there is also reference to Paramount filming the rope-pullers during a dress

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rehearsal,<sup>83</sup> and discussions with a film studio based at Shepperton.<sup>84</sup> The event was listed in the *Radio Times* for broadcast on radio on Saturday 17 June, from 11.35pm, as *The Epilogue of the Greenwich Night Pageant* finishing with 'God Save the King'.<sup>85</sup> At the end of the run, Domvile reflected on 'a wonderful show, which has had a reception in the country far greater than I had ever anticipated, and only marred by the difficult nature of the producer'.<sup>86</sup> The day after the pageant closed Domvile enjoyed a relaxing day in the Royal Box at Wimbledon.<sup>87</sup>

Domvile was president of the Royal Naval College until 1934, when he retired with the rank of admiral.<sup>88</sup> He was knighted in 1934, quite possibly as a result of the successful staging of the Greenwich Night Pageant which made over £3000 (£110,000)<sup>89</sup> for local and naval charities such as the Royal Naval Benevolent Trust and the Dreadnought Hospital.<sup>90</sup> As the accounts were being closed in October 1933, Domvile was still railing against the imposition of the £3000 entertainments tax. Nevertheless, he reported that '[i]n view of this high tax and the necessarily high cost of a Production suitable to the dignity and glorious history of Greenwich, the Board regard the results as very satisfactory'.<sup>91</sup> However, once he had retired from the navy, Domvile's political views and subsequent activities led to the event being quietly forgotten. He made the first of many visits to Germany in 1935, where he mixed with senior Nazi officials, and became very critical of British policy and the way British newspapers represented Germany. The Domviles founded a pro-German organisation called The Link in 1937, which had over 4,300 branches all over the UK.<sup>92</sup> Domvile, his wife and his two sons were all under MI5 surveillance from at least the mid-1930s, although no reference is made in their file to the Greenwich Night Pageant.<sup>93</sup> In July 1940, Domvile and his wife were arrested under 18B regulations; Alexandrina went to Holloway and her husband was imprisoned with Oswald Moseley in what he referred to as 'His Majesty's stone frigate on Brixton Hill' until November 1943.<sup>94</sup>

The Greenwich Night Pageant is now remembered as being 'as close as England came to fascist theatre'.<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, it supports the notion that the largest expressions of historical performance 'belong not to Hollywood in the days of Cinemascope but to the ruined castles and village greens of England between 1905 and 1939'. As Dobson has argued, 'the blossoming and passing into obsolescence of the spectacular communal dramatic form that evolved there reveals much about the understanding of the national past and its relation to the present, which briefly sustained a sense of imperial destiny, civic pride and ethnic identity in

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early twentieth century Britain.<sup>96</sup> Early sound cinema did not wipe out the pageant immediately but it did adopt elements of the pre-war pageant within its output. Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) was a swaggering pageant. In 1937, Korda made *Fire Over England*, adapted from A. E. W. Mason's novel, which ends with Elizabeth's visit to Tilbury in 1588. Certainly Arthur B. Wood's *Drake of England* (1935) was a film adaptation of Parker's pageant-play *Drake*.<sup>97</sup>

In the summer of 1933, in the wake of the pageant, Domville basked in 'a revived interest in Greenwich'.<sup>98</sup> Bryant's letter of thanks to the pageant's cast said they

had shown a larger world what Greenwich can do ... It is my hope and belief ... something may still survive to lighten the dark days through which all too many are passing and to bring nearer those better ones for which we and all Englishmen pray return to our country.<sup>99</sup>

After 1945 a few pageants were staged in small villages, especially around the time of the Festival of Britain in 1951, but 'after the Blitz ... it seemed much harder for the English to go on thinking of history as a providential fancy dress procession that was all about them but which they could simply sit back and savour as it passed by'.<sup>100</sup> In the early summer of 1933, however, as events in Nazi Germany began to escalate, the Domvilles, Bryant and all who had experienced the Greenwich Night Pageant had witnessed an eclectic celebration of Britain's past glories in the shadow of a second total war.

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- 23 *Ibid.*, 4 October 1932.
- 24 LHMCA, C22, letter from Domvile to Bryant, 12 September 1932.
- 25 *Ibid.*, letter from Domvile to Bryant, date illegible but will be around mid-1932.
- 26 NMM DOM 49, vol. XLIX, 15 September 1932.
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- 28 LHMCA, C22, letter from Callender to Bryant, 6 February 1933.
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- 31 *Ibid.*, 5 October 1932.
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- 36 Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
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*Afterword*  


## Britain and the sea: new histories

*Jan Rüger*

A century ago it was universally accepted by the educated world that naval history belonged at the heart of British history, but for much of the intervening period it has been relegated to the margins of serious history, regarded as a subject interesting, if at all, only to specialists and enthusiasts. It is still widely assumed that sea power mattered only in the context of empire; making it irrelevant and faintly embarrassing for the historian anxious to explore areas of relevance to modern debates.<sup>1</sup>

The defensive tone was striking when the British Academy used these words to announce a panel discussion on ‘Does Naval History Matter?’ in 2006. One could debate if ‘irrelevant and faintly embarrassing’ was an entirely accurate description at the time – arguably, the position of naval history was never quite as marginal as that. But even if some of the pessimism seemed exaggerated, it did reflect a broad consensus about the state of naval history as isolated from much of the mainstream of historical writing. As a review essay put it more recently, the history of the navy used to be an ‘unfashionable sub-genre’, seen as ‘largely technical’ and ‘thoroughly unimaginative.’<sup>2</sup>

Much has changed since, as the chapters in this volume comprehensively demonstrate. The history of the navy and the history of Britain’s relationship with the sea more generally have turned into a vibrant field in which different historiographies and disciplines interact. More than ever before, the naval past is being situated in broad political, economic, social and cultural contexts. Three distinct historiographical developments explain this renaissance. First, traditional naval history – with its focus on strategy, technology and war – has been reinvigorated from within. Second, the history of the navy and the sea has been discovered