

Correlli Barnett : A decade that sold off the future (*Sunday Times/ News Review*, p.4, August 5 – 2001)

As an Anglophile, public-school-educated Frenchman, I am somehow reluctant to accept your caricature of British endeavours in the 1950s, complete with a rather facile, Tory-bashing cartoon.¹ While appreciating that the topic has probably been dealt with at greater length in your book, no doubt revisiting ground already covered by Anthony Sampson (*The New Anatomy of Britain* and all that), as it stands, your article, while obviously well-researched, really amounts to a pessimistic, one-sided revelation of unmitigated disaster. As such, it leaves the reader struggling and asking himself: “Was it really that bad?”

After visiting the 1949 “Britain Can Make It” exhibition as a school-boy, I did notice that your country failed to deliver (which countries didn’t?) on several inventions during the following decade. But, certainly not to the extent that you suggest. While agreeing that the mindset (newspeak for ‘mentality’) of Britain’s decision-makers was then still suffering from being in a neo-Edwardian/Victorian time-warp, and that the British worker was unwittingly equipped with a built-in death wish, all in all, their joint track record was far from negative. Rather the reverse, in fact, as would have been apparent to the reader, had a more balanced picture been allowed to emerge. This, then, is my main contention: your otherwise brilliantly inspired coverage of the topic apparently fails *to grasp the positive side of things*, while some half-truths and erroneous statements are allowed to creep in.

An attempt will now be made to illustrate the above comments, chiefly targeting naval shipbuilding, civil and military aviation, together with one or two miscellaneous points.

Naval shipbuilding

In 1955 “British shipbuilding was heading for extinction”. This was probably true of merchant navy ships, far less so regarding warships. Need we enumerate the full tally of successful British vessels launched and commissioned shortly after 1955: the 8 *County* class destroyers, 7 *Tribal*, 4 *Lynx*, 4 *Salisbury*, 15 *Whitby/Rothesay* and 44 *Leander* class frigates. If they were such abysmal failures, how come half of them, after distinguished service with the RN, later found new owners in South America, south-east Asian and ANZAC countries, not to mention cases where they had been already exported there as new construction? And observe how this survey does not extend into the 1970s to take in the Type 21 and 22 frigates, the Type 42 destroyers, etc. Admittedly, though, from-the-keel-up export orders were few and far between in the 1950s (apart from the 3 Venezuelan *Nueva Esparta* and 2 Chilean *Williams* destroyers), a point where I am in partial agreement with you.²

1 - Though, admittedly, Labour also come in for a fair share of flak in the article.

2 - R. V. Blackman, *World’s warships*, 1963, pp.98-99/ 168-182; B. Ireland, *Warships of the World*, 1976, pp.52-53; H. Lyon & J. Moore, *Encycl. world’s warships*, 1978.

Why, however, do you fail to mention the angled deck, the mirror-landing sight (“meat-ball” in American usage), and Mitchell-Brown steam-catapults, British inventions that revolutionised naval aviation,³ being adopted by the RN, USN, “la Royale” (French navy), and others in their big-deck carriers? By the way, the last-named category of vessel was the one that you could have appropriately described as “heading for extinction”. Despite costly, innovative efforts by the RN to provide a credible carrier component (completion of delayed ‘new construction’ programmes (*Hermes*), and extensive, controversial refits (*Victorious*)⁴ in the face of indiscriminate budget cuts, it all came to nothing in the 1960s and 1970s after cancellation of the new CVA-01 carrier programme in 1966,⁵ and after Mr John Nott, in a typically mindless fit of axe-wielding, had sent *Ark Royal* to the breakers (1978). Thus temporarily putting Britain out of the carrier business. The blame, here, lies with the decision-making process of successive British governments, all of them *trying hard both to have their cake and eat it, by attempting far too much with too little*.

Civil and military aviation

You rightly mention the Viscount as the one happy story in British Civil Aviation during the period under review. Perhaps this could have been balanced out by emphasising that as a prop-jet, the Viscount was around at the right time, while the 43 odd Vanguards that followed it at the end of the decade, just as air companies were beginning to invest heavily in pure jets, failed to make a killing. Which also explains the fate of the Britannia. Your allusion to this plane could have contained a codicil to the effect that its failure was not as dismal as you claim: 82 produced, of which 23 used by RAF Transport Command, and a small number of machines exported to Cuba, Mexico, Ghana and Canada, which developed, not only a Britannia-derived long-range freight and personnel transport for the RCAF, the CL-44 Yukon, but a successful, long-serving, piston-engined variant, the CL-28 Argus MR aircraft.⁶

While we are in the maritime reconnaissance department, what of the evergreen Nimrod, of Falklands and Gulf War fame, a Comet variant if ever there was one? The unqualified success of this aircraft, which has been around since 1967, goes some way to atoning for the mediocre success of its forbear the Comet, dogged as it was by disaster in the initial stages of development, and which finally ran to some 98 actually delivered (air-line and non-air-line versions combined), with, like the Britannia, marginal export orders from Argentina, France, Greece, Kuwait, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, etc.⁷ True, the AEW Nimrod never really made it, probably thanks to some gentle arm-twisting by British politicians, anxious to keep alive the “special relationship”, in favour of the Boeing 707 AWACS variant.⁸ Conveniently forgetting, to be quite fair, that with Americans, the so-called “special relationship” can go all

2 - A. Preston, *Aircraft Carriers*, 1979, pp.168-169.

3 - That was the real tragedy, depriving the RN of its last AEW-capable strike carrier, a mistake which would cost lives, not to mention at least four valuable warships, in the Falklands. An old lesson painfully re-learned. C. Eliot & G.W. Gossler, ‘The White Paper on the Falklands’, *Naval Forces*, 1/1983, p.41.

4 - Navy estimates (Cd. 371), in *Brassey’s Annual*, 1958, p.327/n.19.

5 - A. Preston, *op. cit.*, p.181-182; N. Friedman, *Carrier Air Power*, 1981, p.86.

6 - *JAWA*, 1963-63, pép.14-15/ 117-118; W. Green & G. Pollinger, *Observer’s book*, 1960, pp.46-53.

7 - *Ibid.*, p.139. It is quite unfair to compare the unfortunate Comet with the Boeing 707, a more recent, swept-wing design with an uneventful development history.

8 - With the first of seven British E-30 AWACS leaving the Seattle plant in July 1989 (*WDA*, 1990, p.148).

the way from a friendly pat on the shoulder (as during the Falklands conflict, when the US provided state-of-the-art AIM-9L Sidewinder missiles, thus tipping the scales irresistibly in favour of the Sea Harrier over its 'Argie' opponents) to a healthy shove in the backside, as experienced by Canada, when its epoch-making Avro Arrow all-weather fighter was axed following US pressure on the Canadian government!

Reverting to the RAF, to which we can add the FAA, your criticism of "delayed deliveries" is not entirely unwarranted, describing as it does a situation where the average time between test flight and squadron service was 3-4 years, partly due to "teething troubles", partly because of cash-strapped programmes, condemning pilots to make-do with aircraft well past their prime. This was especially true of the Attacker ship-board jet fighter-bomber, scrapped after proving woefully inadequate in service,⁹ and of the Javelin you mention, which, after some dithering, was ordered into production with the full knowledge that it was already obsolescent,¹⁰ or of the unhappy Swift, demoted to PR duties after being proved non-battle-worthy as a fighter...¹¹

This catalogue of woe, should, however, be set off against *some unqualified successes* of the era you sound so eager to clobber. Take the unassuming, straight-winged Seahawk naval fighter of the mid-1950s: 151 orders for the FAA, some 22 for the Netherlands, 68 for the German Kriegsmarine, and 21 (later expanded to 74 thanks to recycled ex-FAA machines) going to India, where they were still operating from the carrier *Vikrant* in the late-1970s.¹² Not a bad achievement in a world of swept-wing and swing-wing jets.

Even more eloquent is the Hunter saga. Described as "the most outstanding British fighter aircraft of the post-World War II period",¹³ nowhere in the literature available to me is there the slightest squeak concerning the aircraft's supposed "teething troubles."¹⁴ Just for the record, some 1980 machines were produced in different versions, over half of them for export to at least 17 different air forces. By any standards, *the Hunter came out on top*.

With regard to British missiles, you could have spoken of the success of air-to-air weapons such as the Firestreak, especially its Mk IV variant, later known as Red Top, developed at the end of the 1950s, and still in front-line service in the early 1980s.¹⁵ As for the further development of the Blue Steel stand-off bomb for British V-bombers, the plan, as I recollect, was hamstrung by the American Skybolt project, which was, in turn, cancelled, leaving the Victors and Vulcans high and dry, as it were.

9 - N. Friedman, *op. cit.*, p.82.

10 - B. Gunston, *World's Combat Aircraft*, 1976, p.109.

11 - *Ibid.*, p.208. And yet, in Germany, operating in conjunction with BAOR, the FR-5 version twice won the NATO Photo-recce competition.

12 - *Ibid*, p.109; B. Ireland, *op. cit.*, p.29; N. Friedman, *op.cit.*, p.82; O. Thetford, *Naval Aircraft*, 1958, pp.224.

13 - *Ibid*, p.109.

14 - Now, if you want a real case of "teething troubles", consider Strategic Air Command's semi-jet/semi-prop-driven B-36, a lumbering dinosaur designed to bomb the Soviet union back into the Stone Age, but probably more of an embarrassment than an asset to the SAC crews designated to fly the contraption. I well remember visiting some on a USAF base early in 1956, and a pilot telling me: "Well, I guess we've still got a few bugs to iron out of this one!"

15 - *Aujourd'hui la guerre*, n°3/1984, p.29.

Regarding the V-bombers, your appearing to suggest that “delayed deliveries” were their chief claim to fame (although that was partly the case with the Victor and Vulcan), is perhaps a little unjust. Especially if applied to the first of the brood. It took the Valiant just on three years to reach the squadrons, which was pretty good going by the standards of the 1950s. Famous for participation in the Suez crisis and one of the earlier Bond films (both events, incidentally, relating to the feel-good legacy of Britain’s former imperial role!), not to mention all of Britain’s A- and H-bomb tests, the Valiant was scrapped in the early 1960s after attempts to use it in the low-altitude role had caused excessive vibration.¹⁶ Most people will by now have forgotten those embarrassing spring 1958 air exercises involving a simulated attack of Britain by high-flying V-bombers. Strangely, the RAF fighters available (Meteors, Hunters and Javelins) failed to intercept. Apparently, the only aircraft to perform properly in that capacity were Scimitars from HMS *Victorious*, sound, fast-climbing naval strike-fighters, much-liked by pilots but with a production run that barely exceeded 80 machines.¹⁷ This may, of course sound irrelevant to the subject under discussion, yet I have included it as tending to show that, success-wise, in 1957/58 at any rate, Bomber Command would appear to have been a bit more cutting edge than Fighter Command.

To proceed, however, with my further demonstration that the V-bombers were far from an unredeemed failure: the highly manoeuvrable Vulcan joined Bomber Command in 1957, but, by the end of the decade, it and its partner, the brilliantly engineered Victor, both lacking on-board, defensive armament, could no longer rely on speed at altitude as their sole protection. After being fitted with Blue Steel for low-altitude delivery in 1964, however, the Victors switched to PR and in-flight-refuelling, while the Vulcans soldiered on, receiving an ECM pack, to such effect that, according to one unconfirmed report, they were still able to give the USAF a good run for their money in NATO air exercises. Finally, as is well-known, both aircraft staged their final performance in the Falklands war – the Victor as an aerial tanker, also carrying out the longest photo-recce missions ever,¹⁸ while the Vulcan achieved similar success with its nail-biting ‘Blackbuck’ bombing raids over Port Stanley.¹⁹ And all of this with aircraft designed and developed during the years of muddle to atomise Russian cities, but actually operating “out of area” in a role and in a scenario un-thought of in the 1950s. Hardly a catalogue of failure, though, is it? Rather the reverse, I would say.

Two British aircraft of the period are missing from our tally before we can round off this *review of non-failures*: the Canberra and the Buccaneer. The first, a classic twin-jet bomber went into widespread RAF service in the 1950s, proving a rugged, reliable plane. 925 of all versions were produced in the UK, 49 were manufactured in Australia, the Americans licence-producing a further 403 as the Martin B-57 interdicator.²⁰ Almost as successful as the Hunter...

16 - B. Gunston, *op. cit.*, p.216.

17 - Here, I am quoting from memory. The Scimitars would have been from N° 700X Trials Flight, as the type only reached squadron service in June 1958 (O. Thetford, *op. cit.*, p.315). Rate-of-climb does not seem to have been a major problem with the Scimitar. However, its lack of radar and poor range handicapped it, not only with regard to its FAA stable-mate the Sea Vixen all-weather interceptor, but vis-à-vis the more modern, and probably more effective, two-seat Buccaneer.

18 - Ascension Island to South Georgia and back, a difference of over 7,000miles, J. Ethell & A. Price, *Air War South Atlantic*, 1983, p.36.

19 - *Ibid.*, p.44. Getting one Vulcan on target involved the use of no fewer than eleven Victor tankers, in “the longest bombing raid in history” (‘Sunday Times’ Insight Team, *Falklands War*, 1982, p.152).

20 - B. Gunston, *op. cit.*, p.19/145; *JAWA*, p.119. Argentine Canberras were actually used, though without conspicuous success, against British forces in the Falkands – a queer twist of fate.

With Duncan Sandys as Minister of Defence (1957-58), it was decided, in a misguided moment, to reduce the numbers of manned aircraft and invest in missiles.²¹ Among those that survived were the Buccaneer, soon to become the RN's standard carrier-borne strike aircraft in the early 1960s, superseding the Scimitar, and operating until 1977, when, after yet another asinine policy change, there were suddenly no more British flat-tops to fly from. It was then reluctantly adopted by the RAF (still smarting from the TSR.2 cancellation), with whom it remained until the Gulf War as the 'Buck' - *one of the most effective strike aircraft ever*.

So much for setting the record straight regarding certain dubious success stories alluded to in your article about defence-related problems. There are two other points I wish to raise.

Miscellaneous

First, taking advantage of after-knowledge, you take to task successive Conservative and Labour governments for "clinging on to the world role". At this juncture it must be stressed that there is something about human nature which makes it extremely arduous, whichever nation it happens to be, for an imperial power to accept the signs of decay and climb down without a whimper. Nor do circumstances always allow of such behaviour. After shedding India, however great may have been Whitehall's wish to abandon its "east of Suez" commitments, such a move was neither feasible, nor honourable, fledgling nations like Malaysia still *requiring a British military presence* (the internal Communist threat, defeated but dormant; "Confrontation" with Indonesia, etc.). Experience has shown world-wide, that, in any imperial withdrawal, precipitation is the worst possible counsellor (India, Algeria, South Yemen).²² That the British government should have stuck to some kind of phased withdrawal from its possessions, whether Singapore or Belize, at least had the merit of having been an attempt at *responsible action*.²³ Such events also had to be visualized as *fitting into an over-all pattern of East-West rivalry*, thus further complicating the issue. As usual, any lump condemnation of apparent imperial nostalgia will, somewhere along the line, fail to address certain specifics.

Second, I fail to see why all the missed opportunities of funding education and vocational training should be laid solely at the door of the 1952-53 re-armament spree, as if that were an isolated episode, of marginal relevance to the British people in their long march on the road to progress. Such thinking resolutely ignores the hopes and fears of the period. There was, at the time, as you may recall, *a not inconsiderable threat to world peace*, although you had to be a fortune-teller to know that the Soviet Union was a giant with clay feet, and the Red Army a paper tiger that would cave in before the Afghan *mujahidin*. Tell me. Should the then British government have stuck their hands in the sand, or applying a Munich-style policy of appeasement at any cost, in other words, something along the lines of your small 'l' Liberal approach, have knuckled under to Russia?

- 21 - "In the immediate future the manned fighter (...) will be reinforced – and possibly largely replaced – by ground-to-air-missiles", R. Saundby, (Air Marshal), *Brassey's*, 1958, p.26.
- 22 - Precisely with regard to Aden (South Yemen) "The United Kingdom Government had no intention of abandoning its obligations towards the Sultans and other rulers of those territories". *Official records* (A/C.4/SR.472), quoted by A. Burns, *In Defence of Colonies*, 1957, p.197.
- 23 - "The Defence Statement (...) outlined a policy designed to enable Britain, without overstraining the economy, to *fulfil her responsibilities overseas* and to bear her fair share of the collective defence of the free world." 1958 Defence White Paper (Cd. 363. February 1958), in *Brassey's*, 1958, p.303.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made to show that there were several noteworthy exceptions to your “across-the-board national failure in the 10 years after the second world war”. In the final analysis, in the areas I have chosen to highlight, I suggest that *positive results more than balance out the bad*. That they are omitted from your article (hopefully not from your book!) merely reinforces the initial impression of imbalance, partiality and selectiveness derived from perusal of the said material.

Post-war Britain had to face up to several challenges, not least to the Cold War and its implications on British policy. As has already been intimated, you appear to relegate this over-riding subject of concern among Britain’s leaders to a water-tight compartment in your essay, no visible connection emerging between re-armament, fleetingly referred to as “under American pressure” and the then on-going East-West confrontation. Britain having just emerged from a six-year global conflict with Fascism, a desire not to under-evaluate a fresh, formidable menace would have been understandable anyway, given the circumstances. True, it may have been seen as a convenient way of maintaining something of Britain’s former glory, but, no matter, the threat was there for all to see.

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