



**John Arbuthnot Fisher**  
**Baron Fisher**

*Memories, by Admiral  
of the Fleet Lord Fisher*

**John Arbuthnot Fisher Baron Fisher**

# **Memories, by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher**



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# PREFACE

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Not long ago a gentleman enclosed me the manuscript of his book, and asked me for a preface. I had never heard of him. He reminded me of Mark Twain in a similar case—the gentleman in a postscript asked Mr. Twain if he found fish good for the brain; he had been recommended it, he said. Twain replied, Yes! and he suggested his correspondent having whales for breakfast!

One gentleman sent me a cheque for two thousand guineas, and asked me to let him have a short article, on any subject. I returned the cheque—I had never heard of him either. I have had some most generous offers from publishers.

Sir George Reid said to me: “Never write an Autobiography. You only know one view of yourself—others see you all round.” But I don’t see any harm in such “Memories” as I now indite! In regard to Sir G. Reid’s observation, there’s one side no one else can see, and that’s “*the inside!*”

Nothing in this Volume in the least approaches the idea of a Biography. Facts illumined by letters, and the life divided into sections, to be filled in with the struggles of the ascent, seems the ideal sort of representation of a man’s life. A friend once wrote me the requisites of a biographer. Three qualifications were:

- (a) Plenty of time for the job.
- (b) A keen appreciation of the work done.
- (c) A devotion to the Hero.

And, as if it didn't so much matter, he added—the biographer should possess a high standard of literary ability.

But yet I believe that the vindication of a man's lifework is almost an impossible task for even the most intimate of friends or the most assiduous and talented of Biographers, simply because they cannot possibly appreciate how great deeds have been belittled and ravaged by small contemporary men. These yelping curs made the most noise, as the empty barrels do! and it's only long afterwards that the truth emerges out of the mist of obloquy and becomes history.

Remember it's only in this century that Nelson has come into his own.

FISHER.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Sworn to no Party—Of no Sect am I!  
I can't be silent and I will not lie!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Time and the Ocean and some Guiding Star  
In High Cabal have made us what we are!”





# MEMORIES

# CHAPTER I

## KING EDWARD VII

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King Edward had faith in me, and so supported me always that it is only natural I should begin this book with the remarks about him which I privately printed long since for use at my death; but events have occurred to alter that decision and induce me to publish this book.

There are more intimate touches than those related here, which I forbear to publish. There is a limit to those peculiar and pregnant little exhibitions of a kind heart's purpose being put in print. They lose their aroma.

In the *Dictionary of National Biography* there is a Marginal Heading in the Life of King Edward as follows:

*"HIS FAITH IN LORD FISHER."*

It is the only personal marginal note! I now descant upon it, not to be egotistical, but to exemplify one of the finest traits in King Edward's noble character—without doubt I personally could not be of the very least service to him in any way, and yet in his belief of my being right in the vast and drastic reforms in the Navy he gave me his unfaltering support right through unswervingly, though every sycophantic effort was exhausted in the endeavour to alienate him from his support of me. He quite enjoyed the numberless communications he got, and the more outrageous the calumnies the more he revelled in my reputed wickedness! I can't very well put some of them on paper, but the Minotaur wasn't in it with me! Also I was a

Malay! I was the son of a Cingalese Princess—hence my wicked cunning and duplicity! I had formed a syndicate and bought all the land round Rosyth before the Government fixed on it as a Naval Base—hence my wealth! How the King enjoyed my showing him my private income as given to the Income Tax Commissioners was £382 6s. 11d. after the legal charges for income tax, annuities, etc., were subtracted from the total private income of £750!<sup>2</sup>

But King Edward's abiding characteristic was his unfailing intuition in doing the right thing and saying the right thing at the right time. I once heard him on the spur of the moment make a quite impromptu and totally unexpected speech to the notabilities of Malta which was simply superb! Elsewhere I have related his visit to Russia when I accompanied him. As Prince Orloff said to me, swept away by King Edward's eloquence, "*Your King has changed the atmosphere!*"

King Edward, besides his wonderful likeness to King Henry the Eighth, had that great King's remarkable attributes of combining autocracy with almost a socialistic tie with the masses. I said to His Majesty once: "Sir, that was a real low form of cunning on your Majesty's part sending to ask after Keir Hardie's stomach-ache!" By Jove, he went for me like a mad bull! and replied: "You don't understand me! I am the King of *ALL* the People! No one has got me in their pockets, as some of them think they have!" and he proceeded with names I can't quote!

Acting on Sir Francis Knollys's example and advice I burnt all his letters to me, except one or two purely personal in their delightful adherence to Right and Justice! but even

these I won't publish ever—they were not meant to be seen by others. What anointed cads are those who sell Nelson's letters to Lady Hamilton! letters written out of the abundance of his heart and the thankfulness of an emotional nature full of heartfelt gratitude to the sympathising woman who dressed his wounds, his torn-off scalp after the Nile, and his never-ceasing calamity of what is now called neuritis, which was for ever wasting his frail body with pain and anguish of spirit as it so unfitted him for exertion.

Here is a letter to King Edward, dated March 14th, 1908:

“With Sir John Fisher's humble duty to your Majesty and in accordance with your Majesty's orders, I saw Mr. Blank as to the contents of the secret paper sent your Majesty, but I did not disclose what makes it so valuable—that it came from a Minister of Foreign Affairs, whose testimony is absolutely reliable.

“I told Mr. Blank and asked him to forgive my presumption in saying it, that we were making a hideous mistake in our half measures, which pleased no one and thus we perpetuate the fable of 'Perfidious Albion,' and that we ought to have thrown in our lot with Russia and completely allowed her to fortify the Aland Islands as against Sweden and Germany.

“For a Naval War against Germany we want Russia with us, and we want the Aland Islands fortified.

“Germany has got Sweden in her pocket, and they will divide Denmark between them in a War against Russia and England, and unless our Offensive is quick and overwhelming Germany will close the Baltic just

as effectually as Turkey locks up the Black Sea with the possession of the Dardanelles.

*“Russia and Turkey are the two Powers, and the only two Powers, that matter to us as against Germany, and that we have eventually to fight Germany is just as sure as anything can be, solely because she can’t expand commercially without it.*

“I humbly trust your Majesty will forgive my presumption in thus talking Politics, but I know I am right, and I only look at it because if we fight we want Russia and Turkey on our side against Germany.

“With my grateful thanks for your Majesty’s letter,

“I am your Majesty’s humble servant,

“J.A. FISHER.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*March 14th, 1908.*

*Note.*—This letter to King Edward followed on a previous long secret conversation with his Majesty in which I urged that we should “Copenhagen” the German Fleet at Kiel *à la* Nelson, and I lamented that we possessed neither a Pitt nor a Bismarck to give the order. I have alluded to this matter in my account of Mr. Beit’s interview with the German Emperor, and the German Emperor’s indignation with Lord Esher as signified in the German Emperor’s letter to Lord Tweedmouth that Sir John Fisher was the most dreaded man in Germany from the Emperor downwards.

It must be emphasized that at this moment we had a mass of effective Submarines and Germany only

had three, and we had seven Dreadnoughts fit to fight and Germany had none!

This proposal of mine having been discarded, all that then remained for our inevitable war with Germany was to continue the concentration of our whole Naval strength in the Decisive Theatre of the War, in Northern Waters, which was so unostentatiously carried out that it was only Admiral Mahan's article in *The Scientific American* that drew attention to the fact, when he said that 88 per cent. of England's guns were pointed at Germany.

I mention another excellent illustration of King Edward's fine and magnanimous character though it's to my own detriment. He used to say to me often at Big Functions: "Have I missed out anyone, do you think?" for he would go round in a most careful way to speak to all he should. Just then a certain Admiral approached—perhaps the biggest ass I ever met. The King shook hands with him and said something I thought quite unnecessarily loving to him: when he had gone he turned on me like a tiger and said: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" I humbly said, "What for?" "Why!" he replied, "when that man came up to me your face was perfectly demoniacal! Everyone saw it! and the poor fellow couldn't kick you back! You're First Sea Lord and he's a ruined man! You've no business to show your hate!" and the lovely thing was that then a man came up I knew the King did perfectly hate, and I'm blessed if he didn't smile on him and cuddle him as if he was his long-lost brother, and then he turned to me afterwards and said with

joyful revenge, "*Well! did you see that?*" Isn't that a Great Heart? and is it to be wondered at that he was so Popular?

An Australian wrote a book of his first visit to England. He was on a horse omnibus sitting alongside the 'Bus Driver—suddenly he pulled up the horses with a jerk! The Australian said to him, "What's up?" The Driver said, "Don't you see?" pointing to a single mounted policeman riding in front of a one-horse brougham. The Australian said, "What is it?" The 'Bus Driver said, "It's the King!" The Australian said, "Where's the escort?" thinking of cavalry and outriders and equerries that he had read of! The 'Bus Driver turned and looked on the Australian with a contemptuous regard and said: "Hescourt? 'e wants no Hescourt! Nobody will touch a 'air of 'is 'ead!" The Australian writes that fixed him up as regards King Edward!

His astounding memory served King Edward beautifully. Once he beckoned me up to him, having finished his tour round the room, to talk about something and I said: "Sir, the new Japanese Ambassador is just behind you and I don't believe your Majesty has spoken to His Excellency." The King instantly turned round and said these very words straight off. I remember them exactly; he took my breath away: "My dear Ambassador, do let me shake you by the hand and congratulate you warmly on the splendid achievement yesterday of your wonderful country in launching a 'Dreadnought' so completely home-produced in every way, guns, armour engines, and steel, etc. Kindly convey my admiration of this splendid achievement!"

I remembered then that in the yesterday's paper there had been an account of the great rejoicings in Japan on the

launch of this "Dreadnought." The sequel is good. The Japanese Ambassador sought me later in the evening and said: "Sir John! it was kind of you to remind the King about the 'Dreadnought' as it enables me to send a much coveted recognition to Japan in the King's words!" I said: "My dear Ambassador, I never said a word to the King, and I am truly and heartily ashamed that as First Sea Lord it never occurred to me to congratulate you on what the King has truly designated as a splendid feat!"

I expect the Ambassador spent a young fortune in sending out a telegram to Japan, and do you wonder that King Edward was a Cosmopolitan Idol?

Another occasion to illustrate his saying out of his heart always the right thing at the right time. I was journeying with His Majesty from Biarritz to Toulon—I was alone with him in his railway carriage, there was a railway time table before him. The train began unexpectedly to slow down, and he said "Hulloa! why are we stopping?" I said, "Perhaps, your Majesty, the engine wants a drink!" so we stopped at a big station we were to have passed through—the masses of people shouted not "Vive le Roi!" but "EDOUARD!" (As the Governor of the Bank of France said to a friend of mine, "If he stays in France much longer we shall have him as our King! When's he going?"). Sir Stanley Clarke I saw get out and fetch the Prefect and the General in Command to the King—the King got out, said something sweet to the Prefect and then turned to the General and said with quite unaffected delight, "Oh, Mon Général! How delightful to meet you again! how glorious was that splendid regiment of yours, the —th Regiment of Infantry, which I inspected 20

years ago!" If I ever saw Heaven in a man's face, that General had it! He was certainly a most splendid looking man and not to be forgotten, but yet it was striking the King coming out with his immediate remembrance of him. Well! that incident you may be sure went through the French Army, and being a conscript nation, it went into every village of France! Do you wonder he was loved in France? And yet the King had the simplicity and even the weaknesses of a child, and sometimes the petulance thereof. He gave me a lovely box of all sizes of rosettes of the Legion of Honour adapted to each kind of uniform coat, and he added, "Always wear this in France—I find it aids me very much in getting about!" As if he wasn't as well known in all France as the Town Pump!

These are the sweet incidents that illustrate his nature!

He went to a lunch at Marienbad with some great swells who were there who had invited His Majesty to meet a party of the King's friends from Carlsbad, where I was—I wasn't asked—being an arranged snub! A looker-on described the scene to me. The King came in and said "How d'ye do" all round and then said to the Host, "Where's the Admiral?" My absence was apologised for—lunch was ready and announced. The King said, "Excuse me a moment, I must write him a letter to say how sorry I am at the oversight," so he left them stewing in their own juice, and His Majesty's letter to me was lovely—I've kept that one. He began by d—ing the pen and then the blotting paper!—there were big blots and smudges! He came back and gave the letter to my friend and said, "See he gets it directly you get back to Carlsbad to-night."

Once at a very dull lunch party given in his honour I sat next King Edward and said to His Majesty: “Pretty dull, Sir, this—hadn’t I better give them a song?” He was delighted! (*he always did enjoy everything!*) so I recited (but, of course, I can’t repeat the delicious Cockney tune in writing, so it loses all its aroma!). Two tramps had been camping out (as was their usual custom) in Trafalgar Square. They appear on the stage leaning against each other for support!—too much beer! They look upwards at Nelson on his monument, and in an inimitable and “beery” voice they each sing:

“We live in Trafalgar Square, with four Lions to guard  
us,  
Fountains and statues all over the place!  
The ‘Metropole’ staring us right in the face!  
We own it’s a trifle draughty—but we don’t want to  
make no fuss!  
What’s *good e-nough* for Nelson is good *e-nough* for  
us!”

On another occasion I was driving with him alone, and utterly carried away by my feelings, I suddenly stood up in the carriage and waved to a very beautiful woman who I thought was in America! The King was awfully angry, but I made it much worse by saying I had forgotten all about him! But he added, “Well! find out where she lives and let me know,” and he gave her little child a sovereign and asked her to dinner, to my intense joy!

On a classic occasion at Balmoral, when staying with King Edward, I unfolded a plan, much to his delight (now that masts and sails are extinct), of fusing the Army into the

Navy—an “Army and Navy co-operative society.” And my favourite illustration has always been the magnificent help of our splendid soldiers at the Battle of Cape St. Vincent, where a Sergeant of the 69th Regiment was the first to board the Spanish three-decker, “San Josef,” and he turned then round to help Lord Nelson, who, with his one arm, found it difficult to get through the stern port of the “San Josef” again. In Lord Howe’s victory two Regiments participated—the Queen’s Royal West Surrey Regiment (formerly the 2nd Foot) and the Worcestershire Regiment (formerly the 29th and 36th Regiment). Let us hope that the Future will bring us back to that good old practice! This was the occasion when I was so carried away by the subject that I found myself shaking my fist in the King’s face!

Lord Denbigh, in a lecture he gave at the Royal Colonial Institute, related an incident which he quite correctly stated had hitherto been a piece of diplomatic secret history, and it is how I got the Grand Cordon of the Legion of Honour, associated with a lovely episode with King Edward of blessed memory.

In 1906, at Madeira, the Germans first took an hotel; then they wanted a Convalescent Home; and finally put forth the desire to establish certain vested interests. They imperiously demanded certain concessions from Portugal. The most significant of these amounted to a coaling station isolated and fortified. The German Ambassador at Lisbon called on the Portuguese Prime Minister at 10 o’clock one Saturday night and said that if he didn’t get his answer by 10 o’clock the next night he should leave. The Portuguese sent us a telegram. That night we ordered the British Fleet

to move. The next morning the German Ambassador told the Portuguese Prime Minister that he had made a mistake in the cipher, and he was awfully sorry but he wasn't going; it was all his fault, he said, and he had been reprimanded by his Government. (As if any German had ever yet made a mistake with a telegram!)

To resume about the Grand Cordon of the Legion of Honour. The French Official statement when conveying to me the felicitations of the President of the French Republic was that I had the distinction of being at that time the only living Englishman who had received this honour, but the disaster that had been averted by the timely action of the British Fleet deserved it. So that evening, on meeting King Edward, I told His Majesty of the quite unexpected honour that I had received, and that I had been informed that I was the only Englishman that had got it, on which the King said: "Excuse me I've got it!" Then, alas, I made a *faux pas* and said "Kings don't count!" And no more do they! He got it because certainly they all loved him in the first place, and secondly, President Loubet couldn't help it, while if it hadn't been for the British Fleet on this occasion the Germans would have been in Paris in a week, and if the Germans had known as much as they do now they would have been!

I don't mean to urge that King Edward was in any way a clever man. I'm not sure that he could do the rule of three, *but he had the Heavenly gift of Proportion and Perspective!* Brains never yet moved the Masses—but Emotion and Earnestness will not only move the Masses, but they will remove Mountains! As I told Queen Alexandra on seeing his

dear face (dead) for the last time, his epitaph is the great words of Pascal in the “Pensées” (Chapter ix, 19):

“Le cœur a ses raisons  
Que la raison ne connaît point.”

(“The heart has reasons that reason knows nothing about”!)

He was a noble man and every inch a King! God Bless Him! I don’t either say he was a Saint! I know lots of cabbages that are saints!—they couldn’t sin if they wanted to!

## **Postscript.**

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It suddenly occurred to me to send these notes on King Edward to Lord Esher as he had peculiar opportunities of realizing King Edward’s special qualities as a King, and realized how much there was in him of the Tudor gift of being an autocrat and yet being loved of the people!

## **Lord Esher to Lord Fisher**

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ROMAN CAMP,  
CALLANDER, N.B.  
*July 30, 1918.*

MY DEAR ADMIRAL,

The pages are wonderful, because they are *you*.  
Not a square inch of pose about them.

Tears! that was the result of reading what you have to say about King Edward. But do you recollect our talk with him on board the Royal Yacht about France and Germany? Surely that was worth recording.

I have kept many of his letters. They show him to have been one of the “cleverest” of men. He had never depended upon book-learning—why should he?

He read, not books—but men and women—and jolly good reading too!

But he knew everything that it was requisite a King should know—unless Learning prepares a man for action, it is not of much value in this work-a-day world: and no Sovereign since the Tudors was so brave and wise in action as this King!

Your anecdotes of him are splendid. Add to them all that you can remember.

It was a pleasure to be scolded by the King for the sake of the smile you subsequently got.

The most awful time I ever had with him was at Balmoral when I refused to be Secretary of State for War. But I beat him on that, thank God!

Ever yours,  
My beloved Admiral,  
ESHER.

## **Letter from Lord Redesdale**

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1 KENSINGTON COURT, W.

*May 24, 1915.*

MY DEAR FISHER,

Do me the favour of accepting this little attempt to render justice to the best friend you ever had. (King Edward the Seventh.)

You and he were worthy of one another. Your old and very affectionate friend,

REDESDALE.

The following letter, written in 1907, would never have been penned but for the kindly intimacy and confidence placed and reposed in me by King Edward; it therefore rightly comes in these remarks about him; and so does the subsequent explanatory note on “Nelson and Copenhagen.”

## **EXTRACT FROM A LETTER FROM SIR JOHN FISHER TO KING EDWARD**

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I have just received Reich’s book. It is one unmitigated mass of misrepresentations.

In March this year, 1907, it is an absolute fact that Germany had not laid down a single “Dreadnought,” nor had she commenced building a single Battleship or Big Cruiser for eighteen months.

## **Germany has been paralysed by the “Dreadnought.”**

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The more the German Admiralty looked into her qualities the more convinced they became that they must follow suit, and the more convinced they were

that the whole of their existing Battle Fleet was utterly useless because utterly wanting in gun power! For instance, half of the whole German Battle Fleet is only about equal to the English Armoured Cruisers.

The German Admiralty wrestled with the "Dreadnought" problem for eighteen months, and did nothing. Why? Because it meant their spending twelve and a half million sterling on widening and deepening the Kiel Canal, and in dredging all their harbours and all the approaches to their harbours, because if they did not do so it would be no use building German "Dreadnoughts" because they could not float! But there was another reason never yet made public. It is this: Our Battleships draw too much water to get close into the German Coast and harbours (we have to build ours big to go all over the world with great fuel endurance). But the German Admiralty is going, is indeed obliged, to spend twelve and a half million sterling in dredging so as to allow these existing ships of ours to go and fight them in their own waters when before they could not do so. It was, indeed, a Machiavellian interference of Providence on our behalf that brought about the evolution of the "Dreadnought."

To return to Mr. Reich. He makes the flesh of the British public creep at page 78 *et seq.*, by saying what the Germans are going to do. He does not say what they have done and what we have done.

Now this is the truth: England has seven "Dreadnoughts" and three "Dreadnought" Battle

Cruisers (which last three ships are, in my opinion, far better than “Dreadnoughts”); total, ten “Dreadnoughts” built and building, while Germany, in March last, had not begun even one “Dreadnought.” It is doubtful if, even so late as May last, a German “Dreadnought” had been commenced. It will therefore be seen, from this one fact, what a liar Mr. Reich is.

Again, at page 86, he makes out the Germans are stronger than we are in torpedo craft, and states that England has only 24 fully commissioned Destroyers.

Again, what are the real facts? As stated in an Admiralty official document, dated August 22nd, 1907: “We have 123 Destroyers and 40 Submarines. The Germans have 48 Destroyers and 1 Submarine.”

The whole of our Destroyers and Submarines are absolutely efficient and ready for instant battle and are fully manned, except a portion of the Destroyers, which have four-fifths of their crew on board. Quite enough for instant service, and can be filled up under an hour to full crew. And they are all of them constantly being exercised.

There is one more piece of information I have to give: Admiral Tirpitz, the German Minister of Marine, has just stated, in a secret official document, that the English Navy is now four times stronger than the German Navy. Yes, that is so, and we are going to keep the British Navy at that strength, *vide* ten “Dreadnoughts” built and building, and not one German “Dreadnought” commenced last May. But we don’t want to parade all this to the world at large. Also

we might have Parliamentary trouble. A hundred and fifty members of the House of Commons have just prepared one of the best papers I have ever read, shewing convincingly that we don't want to lay down any new ships at all because we are so strong. My answer is: We can't be too strong. Sir Charles Dilke, in the *United Service Magazine* for this month, says: "Sir George Clarke points out that the Navy is now, in October, 1907, stronger than at any previous time in all History," and he adds that Sir George Clarke, in making this printed statement, makes it with the full knowledge of all the secrets of the Government, because, as Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, he, Sir George Clarke, has access to every bit of information that exists in regard to our own and foreign Naval strength.



KING EDWARD VII. (WHO DIED MAY 6TH, 1910) SAYING GOOD-BYE TO LORD FISHER, FIRST SEA LORD, 1910.

(Lord Fisher 69, so also the King.)

N.B.—The King thought the 1841 vintage very good. Certainly good men were born that year!

In conclusion, a letter in *The Times* of September 17th, 1907, should be read. The writer of the letter understates the case, as the British Home Fleet is twenty per cent. stronger than he puts it.

As regards Mr. Reich's Naval statements, they are a *réchauffé* of the mendacious drivel of a certain English newspaper. I got a letter last night from a trustworthy person *à propos* of these virulent and persistent newspaper attacks as to the weakness of the Navy, stating that the recent inspection of the Fleet by Your Majesty has knocked the bottom out of the case against the Admiralty.

I don't mean to say that we are not now menaced by Germany. Her diplomacy is, and always has been, and always will be, infinitely superior to ours. Observe our treatment of the Sultan as compared with Germany. The Sultan is the most important personage in the whole world for England. He lifts his finger, and Egypt and India are in a blaze of religious disaffection. That great American, Mr. Choate, swore to me before going to the Hague Conference that he would side with England over submarine mines and other Naval matters, but Germany has diplomatically collared the United States absolutely at The Hague.

*The only thing in the world that England  
has to fear is Germany, and none else.*

We have no idea, at the Foreign Office, of coping with the German propoganda in America. Our Naval Attaché in the United States tells me that the German Emperor is unceasing in his efforts to win over the American Official authorities, and that the German Embassy at Washington is far and away in the ascendant with the American Government.

I hope I shall not be considered presumptuous in saying all this. I humbly confess I am neither a diplomatist nor a politician. I thank God I am neither. The former are senile, and the latter are liars. But it all does seem such simple common sense to me that for our Army we require mobile troops as against sedentary garrisons, and that our military intervention in any very great Continental struggle is unwise, remembering what Napoleon said on that point with such emphasis and such sure conception of war, and that great combined Naval and Military expeditions should be our rôle. In the splendid words of Sir Edward Grey: "The British Army should be a projectile to be fired by the British Navy."

The foundation of our policy is that the communications of the Empire must be kept open by a predominant Fleet, and *ipso facto* such a Fleet will suffice to allay the fears of the "old women of both sexes" in regard to the invasion of England or the invasion of her Colonies.