**Discourse of Dissent: Bernard Acworth, the British Anti-Oil
Movement and the Royal Navy's Use of Fuels, 1927-1937**

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the interwar expressions of resistance to the use of oil by the British Royal Navy in the period 1927-1937. In particular, it examines the work of Captain Bernard Acworth and the South Wales Back to Coal Movement. It uses a critical geopolitics approach to analyse the ways in which the anti-oil critique framed the social, political, economic and military consequences of Britain's entry into the age of oil; the methods that were used by Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement to give voice to their dissent, and the reception given to their message by official and popular audiences.

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Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter I.....	24
Chapter II.....	46
Chapter III.....	80
Conclusion.....	116
Bibliography.....	122

Introduction

Ultimately, it was the unending quest for speed that brought Britain into the age of oil. Between 1900 and 1914, within the crucible of the technological competitiveness of the Anglo-German naval race, the Royal Navy undertook a rapid and unprecedented transition from using domestic coal to foreign oil as a source of fuel. Oil technology promised speed, an element that the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher, and the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, believed would enable the Navy to retain its superiority over maritime rivals. Oil, however, had only been discovered in significant quantities at the end of the nineteenth century, and none of these fields were located domestically or in the territories of the Empire. Oil, therefore, was an expensive option for Britain and the Navy's transition, in the words of one historian of oil, was a "fateful plunge" into an unknown, untested, and uncertain future.¹

The Admiralty's decision to move to oil fuel instigated enormous changes in the ways in which Britain used and consumed energy. In essence, the Royal Navy initiated the nation's entry into the oil age.² The pace of the Navy's shift in its energy source was remarkable. In the decade between 1902 and 1912, Britain's imports of oil increased by 460 percent, two thirds of which were used by the Navy.³ Over the course of the First

¹ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil Money and Power* (New York: Free Press, 2009): 134; Joseph E. King, "The New Broad Arrow: Origins of British Oil Policy," *Mariner's Mirror*, 39 (1953): 187.

² Cars and aeroplanes played an important role in the development of oil, but the Navy began the transition. Cars did not appear in any sizeable quantity until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Aeroplanes were mostly developed and used by the Navy up until the First World War. The oil literature credits Britain's entry into the age of oil to the Admiralty. For a particularly interesting discussion see Yergin, *The Prize*, 'The Fateful Plunge,' Chapter 8, 150-164.

³ G. Gareth Jones, "The Oil-Fuel Market in Britain 1900-14: A Lost Cause Revisited," *Business History* 20, no. 2 (July 1978): 144-145.

World War, imports of oil more than doubled, and from 1918 to 1936, they redoubled.⁴ The decision to transit the Navy to oil was, equally, a decision to abandon the use of British coal. The Admiralty's purchases of Welsh coal for fuel were practically discontinued between 1913 and 1931 (its contracts declined by 96 percent), with huge consequences for the economic and social wellbeing of the region.⁵ This switch was an odd step to take, since Britain possessed massive reserves of the best coal in the world and produced 25 percent of the global total at a cheaper cost than anywhere in Europe.⁶ In what one student of this period has called a "Faustian bargain," the Admiralty relinquished Britain's local, staple, fuel for the lure of a few extra knots.⁷ Surprisingly, however, the "Faustian bargain" has been little explored by historians.

This thesis is an examination of the interwar expressions of resistance to the use of oil in the Royal Navy. It investigates the substantial body of dissent that formed at the end of the 1920s and its concerns over the domestic and international ramifications of Britain's use of oil. The logic of the Navy's reliance upon a foreign fuel for the propulsion of its fleet was questioned by critics primarily on the grounds of national security, but also because of its impact on the already troubled domestic coal industry. Heightening reaction to the increasing use of oil was a deep anxiety over what were believed to be the social, political, economic, and military consequences of Britain's entry into the age of oil.

⁴ "Fuel for the Navy," *Naval Review* 25, no. 3 (August 1937): 452.

⁵ "£2,219,000 A Year Lost to Welsh Miners. How the Oil Policy Affects Wages," *Western Mail*, 23 April 1931, 15.

⁶ Jones, "Oil-Fuel Market in Britain 1900-14," 131. Max E. Fletcher refers to the decades preceding the First World War as the 'Age of Coal'. See Max E. Fletcher, "From Coal to Oil in British Shipping," *Journal of Transport History* 3, no. 1 (February 1975): 2.

⁷ Warwick Michael Brown, "The Royal Navy's Fuel Supplies, 1898-1939; the Transition From Coal to Oil," (PhD diss., King's College, University of London, UK, 2006), 7.

At the epicentre of the debate over Britain's reliance upon oil was a retired naval officer, Captain Bernard Acworth, D.S.O. Now an almost forgotten figure, Acworth was the most active and dedicated contributor to the interwar debate over Britain's oil-fuel policy. In the vanguard of the anti-oil resistance movement, Acworth was an exuberant campaigner who wrote, lectured, pamphleteered, lobbied, and electioneered against oil in colourful and insightful ways. This thesis examines the early writings of Captain Acworth; analysing the narratives, tropes, and metaphors that he used to formulate his critique of the Navy's oil policy over the 1927-1931 period. It also explores the activities of the South Wales Back to Coal Movement; discussing its national and regional lobbying efforts, and exploring the ways in which the movement disseminated its anti-oil message to a local audience between 1931 and 1933. If Acworth was the admiral of the anti-oil resistance, the Back to Coal Movement was its flagship: the organisation was the most successful within the ranks of the anti-oil movement, and the most active and visible anti-oil organization to engage in the national fuel debate.⁸ Though often in disagreement as to how policies should be implemented, Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement shared similar goals, pre-eminently, that of ending the dependence on oil and returning to coal. Both of these voices of dissent were concerned with the ways in which oil was corrupting Britain's internal politics, undermining the domestic coal industry, and destabilising the international system. Such concerns aroused considerable opposition and this thesis investigates the varying responses to Acworth and to the anti-oil movement that emanated from both official, pro-oil circles, and the local, popular Welsh press over

⁸ Another example of an organization promoting the use of coal is the Coal Utilisation Council, established in the autumn of 1932. See "The Coal Utilisation Council. Mr. Gordon on its Objects and Policy," *Colliery Guardian* (25 September 1932): 932.

the period 1927-1937. When the anti-oil lobby generated an increasing amount of popular concern about the Navy's use of oil, members of the pro-oil naval community instigated an aggressive war of words that transformed the issue of the Navy's use of oil from a narrowly-defined military policy into a public debate over Britain's energy future.

The Royal Navy's transition from coal to oil brought widespread and rapid change to Britain's navy and to British society. Historian Walter A. McDougall has observed with respect to the relationship between technological and social systems that changes occur in both visible and invisible ways:

I believe that in theory technology is quite neutral. But in practice, big technological systems are never entirely neutral.... the very presence of giant systems requires society to make major political adjustments to adapt to them.... And once you've adjusted your entire economy or political structure to fit a certain technological base, you are captive to it, and the secondary effects, bad or good, have to be lived with. It's not that technology in itself challenges our values, but rather that the things we have to do to accommodate a technological revolution can inadvertently undermine our values.⁹

The ways in which Britain was forced to accommodate its oil fuel revolution were particularly apparent in its political relationships with foreign states and private corporations. In 1905, the aptly named HMS *Swift* became the first vessel in the Royal Navy to burn oil exclusively.¹⁰ The Admiralty was pleased with the success of the experiment and began to search for a commercial supplier of the new fuel. Around the same time, oil companies operating in the Middle East and elsewhere struggled to find markets for their product, which beyond its use in marine boilers, was a technological

⁹ Hal Bowser, "How the Space Race Changed America: An Interview with Walter A. McDougall," *Invention & Technology* 3, no. 3 (Fall, 1987): 25-30.

¹⁰ King, "The New Broad Arrow," 190.

novelty with no established, widespread application.¹¹ The oil historian, G. Gareth Jones has commented with respect to the early relationship between the struggling oil companies and the Royal Navy, that “the goodwill of the British government was therefore a commercial asset of first-rate importance,” and that “the companies made no secret of their desire to secure diplomatic support for their overseas ventures.”¹² Indeed, the relationship between the British government and oil took a significant turn in 1909 with the creation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), a small producer operating in a relatively unmapped concession in the Persian desert.¹³ Just three years later, in 1912, Churchill ordered the construction of five oil-fuelled warships, and in June of 1914, weeks before the outbreak of the First World War, he announced to Parliament that the British Government was to buy 51 percent of APOC.¹⁴ In taking this step, Churchill formed an unprecedented link between the State and private enterprise, and tied the fortunes of Britain and its premier defensive arm to a start-up company, one with little diplomatic or commercial experience, operating some 5300 kilometres away in a foreign country.¹⁵ Britain and the Royal Navy, the first navy in the world to use oil on a large scale for its motive power, had “inaugurated the geopolitics of oil.”¹⁶

¹¹ For an interesting examination of the early oil industry, see Yergin, *The Prize*, ‘The Founders,’ Part I, 17-164.

¹² G. Gareth Jones, “The British Government and the Oil Companies 1912-1924: The Search for an Oil Policy,” *Historical Journal* 20, no. 3 (September 1977): 648.

¹³ King, “The New Broad Arrow,” 191. See also, *Agreement with the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, Limited, with an explanatory memorandum, and the report of the Commission of Experts on their local investigations*, Cmd. 7419 (1914).

¹⁴ Yergin, *The Prize*, 144. Churchill also put two government directors on the executive board of APOC.

¹⁵ As the acting consul for APOC in Persia, Arnold Wilson, said of the Anglo-Persian relationship: “The English idea of an agreement is a document in English which will stand attack by lawyers in a Court of Justice: the Persian idea is a declaration of general intentions on both sides, with a substantial sum in cash, annually or in a lump sum.” Cited in Yergin, *The Prize*, 132.

¹⁶ Dilip Hiro, *The Blood of the Earth: the Battle for the World’s Vanishing Oil Resources* (New York: Nation, 2007): 76. On the geopolitics of oil and the “great game,” see Sara Reguer, “Persian Oil and the First Lord: A Chapter in the Career of Winston Churchill,” *Military Affairs* 46, no. 3 (October 1982): 134-

The rapidity of the Navy's transition to oil, the diverse and extensive uses to which the fuel began to put to use in Britain, and the emerging signs of significant socio-political change were all troubling to a small group of public intellectuals.¹⁷ Boverton Redwood, a well-known expert on coal and oil, wrote extensively on issues of fuel and security during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although an ardent supporter of oil fuel, Redwood cautioned that it should be used only out of necessity – and even then, sparingly.¹⁸ In 1908, J.D. Henry, a prolific writer on oil, warned that Britain, as an island nation with no domestic oil resources was heading toward a state of dependency upon foreign states if it continued to use the new fuel.¹⁹ Another author, Vivian Lewes, wrote with great concern in 1913 that “one of the most important factors

138; Charles Hugh Smith, “Oil and Empire: The Great Game of Geopolitics,” *Oilprice.com* (22 October 2010). Available at: <http://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Oil-And-Empire-The-Great-Game-Of-Geopolitics.html>.

¹⁷ The subject of fuel and energy security had been discussed in Britain as early as the late nineteenth century. W.S. Jevons' classic work, *The Coal Question: An Enquiry Concerning the Progress of the Nation, and the Probable Exhaustion of Our Coal Mines*, published in 1865, was a forward looking exposé of Britain's energy future that warned that the nation was soon to run out of coal and should consider finding an alternative source of fuel. W. Stanley Jevons, *The Coal Question: An Enquiry Concerning the Progress of the Nation, and the Probable Exhaustion of Our Coal Mines* (London: MacMillan, 1865). Jevons was an economist and philosopher who wrote extensively on theories of politics, science, and epistemology. The arguments presented in *The Coal Question* created a ‘coal panic’ in some British newspapers. “Jevons, William Stanley (1835–1882),” R. D. Collison Black in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, see online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, Oxford: OUP, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/14809>, (accessed July 29, 2012).

¹⁸ See Boverton Redwood, *Cantor Lectures on Petroleum and Its Products* (London: W. Trousce, 1886); *Petroleum: Its Production and Use* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1887); “The Future of Oil Fuel,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 62, no. 3188 (December, 1913): 103-116. Sir Thomas Boverton Redwood was one of Britain's first petroleum scientists. In 1912, Redwood served as a consultant on the *Royal Commission on Fuel and Engines*, whose report encouraged First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, to press the Government to purchase a controlling share of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. “Redwood, Sir (Thomas) Boverton, first baronet (1846–1919),” T. A. B. Corley in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, see ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/47996>, (accessed July 29, 2012).

¹⁹ J.D. Henry, *Oil Fuel and the Empire* (London: Bradbury Agnew and Co., 1908). Henry's solution was to develop the oil resources of the Empire, particular the Canadian oil patches in Alberta and Ontario. Henry also wrote *Baku: An Eventful History* (London: Ayer, 1905); *Thirty-Five Years of Oil Transport: the Evolution of the Tank Steamer* (London: Bradbury, Agnew and Co., 1907), and was founder and editor of the journal, *Petroleum World*, which he described as “the largest monthly oil paper in the world.”

in connection with the use of liquid fuel is the supply available for the various purposes to which it is now being put,” a supply that he believed to be diminishing rapidly.²⁰

In 1912, the *Petroleum Review* declared that Britain was entering an “oil fuel age,” a pronouncement that simultaneously suggested the end of the nation’s age of coal.²¹ The journal was, perhaps, a little too eager to herald a new age of oil. The following year the British coalmining industry produced the greatest volume of coal in its history and the price of oil rose to almost prohibitive levels.²² Indeed, the transition from coal to oil was far from smooth. With respect to 1913, one commentator noted that it was the year that “the Age of Coal first encountered head-on the Age of Oil.”²³ The First World War, which ought to have provided ample opportunity for the Royal Navy to illustrate the wisdom of its decision to turn to oil, instead produced further evidence that the fuel was, at least for Britain, a dangerous and unstable new technology. The Battle of Jutland in the summer of 1915 proved indecisive: the extra speed that oil fuel provided did not, as Fisher and Churchill had argued, guarantee victory. In May of 1917, the situation became even worse when the Royal Navy’s oil fuel supplies dropped to under 3 months’ worth as a result of hundreds of oil tankers being sunk by German U-boats in the

²⁰ Vivian B. Lewes, *Oil Fuel* (London: Collins’ Press, 1913): 1. See also Sydney North, *Oil Fuel: Its Supply, Composition, and Application* (London: Charles Griffin, 1905). A second edition of this volume was published in 1911. Two years later Lewes observed: “an oil-field, however prolific, is only a natural storage tank for a long-dead manufacture, and that the more fields we develop and the more petroleum we use, the nearer are we to getting to the inevitable end of the supply.” See Vivian Lewes, “Liquid Fuel,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 61 (May 1913): 666-673.

²¹ Cited in Jones, “The Oil-Fuel Market in Britain,” as *Petroleum Review*, (5 October 1912): 233. The journal, which began publishing in 1912, covered the advances and trends in the international oil industry.

²² Fletcher, “From Coal to Oil in British Shipping,” 4-5. Measured in bulk, coal accounted for over 85 percent of the nation’s exports in 1913.

²³ Fletcher, “From Coal to Oil in British Shipping,” 5.

Atlantic and the Mediterranean. To avoid the complete exhaustion of supplies, the Admiralty ordered its warships to sail at half speed to conserve fuel.²⁴

The perilous situation of the Navy in the First World War contributed in the 1920s to a heightened anxiety over the security of the supply of oil.²⁵ The great expansion of the international oil industry and its increased power over national governments was the concern of Francis Delaisi, in his 1922 monograph, *Oil: Its Influence on Politics*.²⁶ The new resource's destabilising effects on international affairs were also the focus of an article by Captain R.J. Wilkinson, "The Influence of Oil on Imperial Organization," which appeared in the *RUSI Journal* in 1923.²⁷ The longevity and security of the world's supply of oil was a topic of discussion in the influential liberal journal, the *Contemporary Review*, which also provided a forum for an extensive discussion on the health of the domestic coal industry and the ways in which it would survive in the future.²⁸ At the core of these worries was what Hugh Thomas has termed a "castration complex," or the fear

²⁴ Jones, "The British Government and the Oil Companies," 657-658. As Jones asserts, it was during the First World War that "the full implications of the Royal Navy's dependence on foreign fuel supplies were dramatically revealed," an event that "was to haunt government policy-makers from then until the Suez Crisis and beyond."

²⁵ See for example, "U.S. Oil in the War," *The Times*, 29 May 1919, 7; "Oil Supplies in War. Need of British Controlled Fields," *The Times*, 17 November 1925, 16; "Oil Reserve in War," *The Times*, 29 March 1927, 9; "Cotton and Oil Supplies in War. British Dependence on U.S.A.," *The Times*, 28 June 1927, 10.

²⁶ Francis Delaisi, *Oil: Its Influence on Politics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922).

²⁷ Captain R.J. Wilkinson, "The Influence of Oil on Imperial Organization," *RUSI Journal* 68, no. 469 (1923): 109-114. A similar debate was occurring on the other side of the Atlantic; see for example Anton Mohr, *The Oil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926).

²⁸ See, for example, Lord Gainford, "The Coal Problem," *Contemporary Review* 119 (January/June, 1921): 721-737; J.W. Gregory, "The Future of Oil Supply," *Contemporary Review* 119 (January/June, 1921): 778-786; C.F.G. Masterman, "Coal and Power," *Contemporary Review* 126 (July/December, 1924): 433-442. Joseph Albert Pease, Lord Gainford, was a Liberal politician who represented the Mining Association of Great Britain in the Coal Industry Commission (1919). "Pease, Joseph Albert, first Baron Gainford (1860-1943)," Cameron Hazlehurst in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/35446>, (accessed July 29, 2012). J.W. Gregory was a distinguished geologist, explorer, and professor. See "Obituary. Professor J.W. Gregory," *The Times*, 14 June 1932, 16. C.F.G. Masterman was a Liberal politician and journalist. See "Obituary. Mr. C.F.G. Masterman," *The Times*, 18 November 1927, 9.

of Britain being cut off from its necessary and life-sustaining supplies of oil.²⁹ Adding to these worries was a growing recognition that the nation and its empire were not going to become major oil producers – indeed, at no point during the interwar period did Britain produce more than 2 percent of the world’s total production of oil.³⁰ This unfortunate consequence of geography meant that Britain would continue to be reliant upon distant and unpredictable foreign states for supplies of domestic and military fuels.

The far-flung oil fields of the United States, Persia, Russia and Venezuela replaced South Wales as Britain’s energy stockpile in the interwar period. The loss of Admiralty contracts for coal had immeasurable consequences on the coalmining regions of Britain, particularly that of South Wales.³¹ To many contemporary observers, the decline in the nation’s staple industry that came as a result of the substitution of oil for coal amounted to a national crisis that surpassed the threat of the Navy being cut off from its supplies of oil. Writing to the editor of *The Times* in 1919, the Chairman of the Navy League, V. Biscoe Tritton, had a dire warning:

May I be allowed through the courtesy of your columns to draw public attention to the critical position of our two interdependent industries – coal and shipping—and to emphasize as strongly as possible that unless definite action is taken at once to increase the production of both tonnage and coal, at economic rates, Britain will be faced with a crisis in its industrial and economic life far greater than any in its previous history? . . . The decline in coal production . . . menac[es] our very existence as a seafaring nation and bringing in its train a widespread unemployment; instead of increased wages there will be no wages at all in many

²⁹ Hugh Thomas, *The Suez Affair* (London: Pelican, 1970): 39.

³⁰ “Fuel for the Navy,” *Naval Review* 25, no. 3 (August 1937): 452. The search for oil in Britain is an interesting story that deserves more historical attention than exists presently. See for example, E.H. Cunningham-Craig, *Oil Finding: An Introduction to the Geological Study of Petroleum* (London: E. Arnold, 1920); John Roberts, “The Search for Oil,” *Royal Society of Arts Journal* 86, no. 4455 (April 1938): 488-525.

³¹ So too did the loss of contracts from international mercantile marines. Whereas in 1914, 89 percent of the world’s total mercantile fleet was dependent upon coal, much of it coming from South Wales, in 1933 just 54 percent was coal burning. “The Mercantile Marine: Decline in World Tonnage; New Lloyd’s Register,” *The Times*, 19 July 1933, 9.

parts of the kingdom associated with coalmining, shipbuilding, engineering, and shipowning industries. This country lives by its sea power, and the weakening of its sea communications must result in widespread loss and suffering, for sea power means employment.³²

In 1925, the *Royal Commission on the Coal Industry* reported that the coal industry was a fundamental component of Britain's social, industrial, economic, and political life. It composed the greater part of its foreign exports and brought in substantial revenues; it fuelled the nation's industrial centres and it was a powerful diplomatic and military negotiating tool. In essence, coal was the substance that permitted Britain to succeed as a global industrial and military power:

The paramount importance of the coal mining industry in the economic and social life of this country is a commonplace, and it is unnecessary for us to dwell upon it. With the exception of agriculture, to which it is a close second, the industry employs more men than any other; not less than one-twelfth of our population is directly dependent on it. It is the foundation of our iron and steel, shipbuilding and engineering trades and, indeed, of our whole industrial life. The value of its product is in the neighbourhood of £250,000,000 a year. It provides one-tenth of our exports in value and about four-fifths of them in volume. By furnishing outward cargo for a large amount of shipping, it cheapens freights for the imports on which we depend for our vital needs.³³

As the 1920s advanced, the debates over coal and oil became much more complex than those of the pre-war period.³⁴ Like the early twentieth century discourses on the subject, the commentary of the mid-1920s continued to be dominated by the proponents of oil who believed that the fuel was providing Britain with immeasurable technological, economic, industrial, and military benefits – in short, that the fuel was a driver of ‘progress’ and a guarantor of national success in the future. A notable exception,

³² V. Biscoe Tritton, “Sea and Coal,” *The Times*, 10 March 1919, 15.

³³ *Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry*, Cmd. 2600 (1925): 3.

³⁴ For a sampling of the diversity in publications on energy and fuel during this period, see J.M. Kenworthy, “The Industrial Situation in Britain,” *North American Review*, 223 (1926/1927): 400-405; Lord Aberconway, *The Basic Industries of Great Britain: An Historic and Economic Survey* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927); Watson Davis, “Science Transmutes Coal into Oil,” *Current History* 27, no. 2 (November 1927): 248-250.

however, was Captain Bernard Acworth. Beginning with his first book, *The Great Delusion*, published in 1927, Acworth developed a strong, informed critique of the Navy's oil policy which drew upon themes of foreignness, insecurity, weakness, and decline, echoing earlier contributions to the national fuel debate. Acworth challenged the view that oil was a progressive and inherently positive technological development. He argued that Britain would only be safe and powerful if the Royal Navy returned to the use of the nation's local supply of coal. While Acworth was unsuccessful in finding support for his anti-oil campaign from within naval circles, his message was fully embraced by the local audiences that he encountered in the coalmining region of South Wales. The Back to Coal Movement was formed in response to the challenge Acworth mounted to the Admiralty's fuel policy. The movement rallied a large and diverse group of supporters at the local level and used its growing numerical strength, as well as its significant political and industrial influence, to engage with the makers of the nation's oil policy. During the period 1927-1938, Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement dominated the national fuel debate. They played a major role in critiquing Britain's oil policies and in fostering popular local resistance to the use of oil in the Royal Navy.

Only a handful of scholars have investigated Britain's transition from coal to oil. Indeed, G. Gareth Jones has commented that "this whole episode in Britain's energy history [has been] largely ignored by historians."³⁵ Nevertheless, the secondary material that does exist on the topic has been useful in situating this research. Some historiographical discussion is merited here because, to date, no comprehensive survey of the available literature has been undertaken.

³⁵ Jones, "The Oil-Fuel Market in Britain," 131.

Scholars have explored aspects of the transition from coal to oil, but none have focussed on the expressions of resistance to the transition and there has yet to be a full examination of the British anti-oil movement. Joseph E. King was the first historian to investigate the origins of British naval oil policy, in an article published in the *Mariner's Mirror* in 1953.³⁶ Although King focuses almost exclusively on the decision-making processes of the Admiralty, concluding that "in the circumstances . . . the Admiralty oil policy of 1914 was a wise and considered one," his article is a rarity for at least acknowledging the resistance to the transition,³⁷ making brief mention of the anti-oil movement's concerns over the security of the nation's foreign oil supplies.³⁸ King's article, however, fails to produce an analysis of the anti-oil movement, although he does conclude that: "[i]n all fairness, it must be asserted that they were not mere reactionaries; the proponents of coal advanced cogent arguments."³⁹ Michael Lewis's *History of the British Navy*, published in 1957, also takes notice of the presence of an anti-oil lobby, but he does not identify its origin, its members and their concerns, or the ways in which they disseminated their messages.⁴⁰ He ignores the complexities of the anti-oil movement's arguments and simply concludes that oil "was in fact a risk which we had to accept."⁴¹

Max E. Fletcher's study of the British merchant marine's transition from coal to oil during the interwar period provides an insightful parallel when contrasted with the similar transition made in the Royal Navy.⁴² Fletcher provides an interesting background to the growth in the use of oil in Britain, in both maritime and domestic applications. He

³⁶ King, "The New Broad Arrow," 187-213.

³⁷ King, "The New Broad Arrow," 200.

³⁸ King, "The New Broad Arrow," 189.

³⁹ King, "The New Broad Arrow," 189.

⁴⁰ Michael Lewis, *A History of the British Navy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957).

⁴¹ Lewis, *A History of the British Navy*, 256-7.

⁴² Fletcher, "From Coal to Oil in British Shipping," 1-19.

pursues a compelling argument that the increased use of oil for maritime fuel contributed to the process of industrial decay in Britain's coalmining regions. Although his article is filled with useful statistics and analyses of the period, Fletcher does not, however, take into account the presence of any resistance to the widespread industrial and economic changes that he describes.

G. Gareth Jones was a leading historian of oil during the 1970s and 1980s, and has written extensively on oil and its influence on Britain's international relations. Jones is one of the few historians to undertake any detailed, insightful analysis of the interwar debate over the use of fuels in Britain, and the only scholar to pay any attention to the element of resistance in the fuel debate. In his article, "The British Government and the Oil Companies 1900-1924," published in 1977, Jones provides a well-balanced and fully documented examination of the early difficulties that the British government faced in making arrangements with private companies for the procurement of naval fuel.⁴³ Jones states that these private-public interactions were often bungled, misguided, and lacking in foresight, which had serious consequences for the nation. Many of the conclusions reached by Jones are in accord with the arguments of Bernard Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement, yet no mention is made of either. In another article, published in 1978, Jones takes note of the anti-oil movement, stating that "the oil-fuel versus coal issue aroused very considerable interest among contemporaries and for many of them, at least, the outcome was far from a foregone conclusion."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the study by Jones

⁴³ Jones, "The British Government and the Oil Companies," 647-672.

⁴⁴ Jones, "The Oil Fuel Market in Britain," 131. See also by Jones, *The State and the Emergence of the British Oil Industry* (London: Macmillan, 1981), and "Review of Some Recent Histories of International Oil," *Journal of Economic History* 43, no. 4 (December 1983): 993-996.

does not explore this ‘considerable interest,’ and he includes no anti-oil movement sources in his footnotes.

B.S. McBeth’s *British Oil Policy, 1919-1939* is another example of a study of the Navy’s transition to oil, but it too fails to note any resistance to the process.⁴⁵ The book is notable for its focus on the issue of Britain’s dependence upon foreign states for its oil supply, but McBeth seems to suggest that the only parties concerned with Britain’s declining energy security during the interwar period were in the government or at the Admiralty. While the book is interesting in its condemnation of Admiralty policy, the presence of a social or cultural dimension to the nation’s energy debates is unacknowledged.⁴⁶

Eric J. Dahl has also written on the Royal Navy’s transition from coal to oil in a study focussing on the early years of the interwar period.⁴⁷ Dahl’s work is unusual in that he discusses the transition’s effects upon British social and economic life, but his article has shortcomings. For example, he relies on a small set of sources, many of which are secondary. He also approaches the subject largely from the perspective of a military historian. Like Fletcher, Dahl concludes that the oil-fuel transition led to massive and widespread changes in British society, but he completely ignores the presence of any societal reaction or resistance to the transition. In fact, Dahl goes further by suggesting that the transition was an inevitable and inherently progressive technological development: “The transition from coal to oil in the Royal Navy came about through a

⁴⁵ B.S. McBeth, *British Oil Policy, 1919-1939* (London: Frank Cass, 1985).

⁴⁶ Jones assessed this study with more than an ounce of criticism: “This is an inadequate book about an important subject. . . It is to be hoped that in the future Frank Cass will do more homework before agreeing to publish manuscripts of this ilk.” See G. Gareth Jones, “Review: B.S. McBeth. *British Oil Policy*,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 4 (October 1986): 929-930.

⁴⁷ Eric J. Dahl, “Naval Innovation: From Coal to Oil,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Winter 2000/2001): 50-56.

variety of factors. . . [f]undamentally, it was a technological phenomenon waiting to happen.”⁴⁸

The most considered examination of the British interwar fuel debate can be found in Warwick Michael Brown’s unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Royal Navy’s Fuel Supplies, 1898-1939; the Transition from Coal to Oil*. Brown “examines the consequences of the Royal Navy’s transition from burning coal to burning oil 1898-1939, and argues they were more far reaching than recognized hitherto.”⁴⁹ His use of sources and his analysis, however, is heavily tilted toward the perspective of the Royal Navy and the Admiralty and, like Dahl, he approaches the subject from a military history perspective. Indeed, the greater part of the dissertation is devoted to a history of the Admiralty’s technical development of oil boilers, its efforts to find contracts, and the operational benefits of oil at sea. Brown notes the lack of historiographical attention paid to the subject of the Navy’s transition to oil, but he does not engage with the literature that does exist. “Fuel is fundamental to a modern mechanical navy without which a warship is at best a bluff and little more than a hulk,” he writes. “It is therefore astounding that hitherto no work has been devoted to it and it has been treated glibly by most naval historians.”⁵⁰

While Brown’s dissertation has certain weaknesses, he is the only historian to investigate the contributions of Bernard Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement to the

⁴⁸ Dahl, “Naval Innovation,” 56.

⁴⁹ Brown, “The Royal Navy’s Fuel Supplies,” 2.

⁵⁰ Brown, “The Royal Navy’s Fuel Supplies,” 8. Brown asserts that “so brief and slipshod appearance does fuel make in most works of naval history that they are often as not misleading,” yet he relies upon just two historiographical sources in his analysis: J.A. Lynn (ed.), *Feeding Mars: Logistics in Western Warfare from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Boulder: Westview, 1993), and A.J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: the Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, Vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). Brown makes no mention of the work of King, Fletcher, Jones, McBeth, or Dahl.

British fuel debate. In the final chapter, entitled “Back to Coal,” Brown states that he intends to “look at the social, political and economic agendas that motivated the champions of coal.”⁵¹ The chapter as a whole, however, is not about Acworth, the Back to Coal Movement, or the discourse of resistance to oil fuel – none of which receives a mention until the eleventh page of the fifteen-page chapter.⁵² Brown does not explore the formulation of the movement’s critique, the bases of its concerns, or the methods used to disseminate its message. Brown describes Acworth as “a constant irritant to the Admiralty” and his anti-oil campaign as a series of “distractions.”⁵³ Brown concludes his analysis of the anti-oil movement by stating that “purists of the ‘Back to Coal’ movement, such as Acworth, were never going to be satisfied, but the furore they raised could not be ignored as it challenged the Admiralty’s competency.”⁵⁴ Brown, however, views the anti-oil movement as a reactionary body whose concerns were unfounded and whose efforts were futile.

For the most part, naval historians have assessed the transition to oil fuel as an inevitable, linear technological advancement that was tacitly accepted and even encouraged by British society. Most studies from the field of naval history have not even recognized the existence of any debate on the issue of the transition. Arthur Jacob Marder, Bryan Ranft, and Jon Tetsuro Sumida, all leading naval historians, have written extensively on the technological, operational, administrative, and strategic aspects of the

⁵¹ Brown, “The Royal Navy’s Fuel Supplies,” 244.

⁵² In addition to this shortcoming, Brown cites Acworth’s work only once in the chapter, and none of the the Back to Coal Movement material.

⁵³ Brown, “The Royal Navy’s Fuel Supplies,” 271.

⁵⁴ Brown, “The Royal Navy’s Fuel Supplies,” 258.

transition to oil in the interwar period, but none takes into account either the social and cultural consequences of the policy or the expressions of resistance to the transition.⁵⁵

The Navy's shift to oil fuel was not exclusively an issue of military policy; the consequences of the transition to oil had implications for the coal industry, the coal mining regions, and the nation at large. It is interesting, then, to note that in the literature on these subjects there exists hardly any mention of the anti-oil movement, in particular, or any consideration of the debate over the Navy's transition, more generally. For the most part, the scholarly discussion on the transition of the Royal Navy from coal to oil, and the discourses that emerged as a result, have taken place in the literature on oil and the oil industry. Yet here, as elsewhere, there is a tendency to focus on the pro-oil dimension of the debate. It is rarely made explicit in the extensive literature on Britain and the oil industry in all its forms, that there was a large, active, and highly vocal resistance at the local and national levels to the fuel's development. In fact, a great deal of the scholarly attention given to the subject of the transition is directed entirely outside Britain.⁵⁶ Although in a minority, there have been a handful of authors who have attempted to situate the discourses of dissent within the larger history of the British interwar experience with the fuel.

⁵⁵ See for example, Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: the Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, Vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran: Studies of the Royal Navy in War and Peace, 1915-1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); Ranft, *Technical Change and British Naval Policy, 1860-1939* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977); Sumida, "British Naval Administration and Policy in the Age of Fisher," *Journal of Military History* 54, no. 1 (January, 1990): 1-26; Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy; Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889-1914* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1993).

⁵⁶ As Jones has lamented, this historiographical trend points to an "irritating obsession of historians with the very small British interests in Middle Eastern Oil." G. Gareth Jones, "Review: *Oil and Empire* by Marian Kent," *Historical Journal* 20, no. 2 (June 1977): 516.

Marian Kent's *Oil and Empire* is a valuable study of the relationships between Britain, the oil industry, and oil producing states during the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁵⁷ But, as Jones observes, "this book is about diplomacy rather than oil." Moreover, Kent's narrative ends abruptly in 1920, ignoring the persistent element of dissent that coloured British oil policy discourse throughout the interwar period.⁵⁸ A rather different work is Daniel Yergin's *The Prize*, which presents a colourful and entertaining narrative of the development of oil throughout the twentieth century, with particular attention paid to Britain and the Royal Navy. Yergin, however, unfortunately does not examine the interwar debate that emerged in reaction to the events he outlines.⁵⁹

Most surprising is the sparse mention of Bernard Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement in the vast literature on coal and the British coal industry. Michael Asteris does note the relationship between the Admiralty's use of oil and the decline in the Welsh coal industry, but he does not identify the existence of any public debate on the issue.⁶⁰ Chris Williams and Michael Thomas's studies of South Wales and the importance of its coal industry are informative and filled with useful statistics, but neither one points to the Royal Navy's transition to oil as a factor in the region's difficult interwar decades, nor do they mention the existence of a fuel debate during this period.⁶¹

In general histories of Britain and Wales, too, there is a lack of attention paid to the inter-war fuel debate. Wales was, at times, the epicentre of the anti-oil movement,

⁵⁷ Marian Kent, *Oil and Empire: British Policy and Mesopotamian Oil, 1900-1920* (London: Macmillan, 1976).

⁵⁸ Jones, "Review: *Oil and Empire* by Marian Kent," 516.

⁵⁹ Yergin, *The Prize*.

⁶⁰ Michael Asteris, "The Rise and Decline of South Wales Coal Exports, 1870-1930," *Welsh History Review* 13, (1986/1987): 24-43.

⁶¹ See Chris Williams, *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfields 1898-1947* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), and Michael Thomas, *The Death of an Industry: South Wales Mining and Its Decline – the Local Story in a Global Context* (Singapore: Colben Systems, 2004).

yet, in the Welsh historiography there are no studies of Acworth or the Back to Coal Movement.⁶² Judith M. Brown and W.M. Roger Louis's volume on the twentieth century in the *Oxford History of the British Empire* provides a disappointingly brief mention of the "series of pregnant developments" that introduced oil into the Royal Navy, but again fails to mention the resistance to this process.⁶³ Brown and Louis write that "Britain's basic problem in the inter-war period, as in the war itself, was how to combine two barely compatible aims – the security of her Imperial communications and of oil supplies on the one hand and, on the other, the retention of Arab and Iranian tolerance by showing an adequate response to nationalist aspirations."⁶⁴ The book, however, jumps immediately to the war, passing over the interwar debate on the logic of the nation's oil policy and the security of its foreign supplies.

Historians and others writing on the subject of oil have largely failed to assess the introduction and expansion of the use of oil in Britain as a discourse, that is, as an occurrence which provoked multiple contrasting and competing visions of the political, commercial, industrial, and social consequences of making such a fundamental technological transition. A synthesis of the various writings on the topic reveals that the dominant historiographical conclusion is that the Royal Navy's transition to oil was an evolutionary and linear technological inevitability that occurred with little or no social response. In short, the anti-oil/pro-coal voices, and the efforts they undertook to make themselves understood and accepted, have been largely written out of the historical

⁶² The local histories of Cardiff, for example, contain no mention of the Back to Coal Movement, which was founded in and based out of that city. See Stewart Williams, *The Cardiff Book*, Vol. 2 (Cardiff: Stewart Williams, 1974).

⁶³ Judith M. Brown and W.M. Roger Louis, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. 4, *The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 493.

⁶⁴ Brown and Louis, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, 503.

record. This thesis will revisit the contemporary British interwar debate on oil, and will attempt to correct this imbalanced analysis of the coal to oil transition through a comprehensive examination of the ‘other’ side of the interwar fuel debate.

The work adds a new facet to our understanding of the dynamics of the oil-fuel debate, and of the perceptions of nationalism, security, and geopolitics that were at play. It is the first study to explore the expressions of resistance to the use of oil in Britain during the interwar period. It takes a ‘bottom up’ approach, viewing the transition to oil, also for the first time, through the lens of the anti-oil/pro-coal movement. It is the only comprehensive examination and evaluation of both Captain Bernard Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement and, as such, initiates the long-overdue process of mapping out the debate, defining its parameters, identifying its voices, institutions, and organizations, and locating where and in what manner debate occurred.

The thesis employs a critical geopolitics approach. Developed throughout the 1990s by geographer Gearóid Ó Tuathail, critical geopolitics explores the cultural and social origins of geopolitical expressions, imaginations, and practices. As Ó Tuathail and fellow geographer Andrew Agnew have stated, critical geopolitics expands and improves upon traditional geopolitical theory:

Geopolitics, some will argue, is, first and foremost, about practice and not discourse; it is about actions taken against other powers, about invasions, battles and the deployment of military force. Such practice is certainly geopolitical but it is only through discourse that the building up of a navy or the decision to invade a foreign country is made meaningful and justified. It is through discourse that leaders act, through the mobilization of certain simple geographical understandings that foreign-policy actions are explained and through ready-made geographically infused reasoning that wars are rendered meaningful. How we understand and constitute our social world is through the socially structured use of

language. . . [which] helps us understand the social construction of worlds and the role of geographical knowledge in that social construction.⁶⁵

Critical geopolitics seeks to identify the ways in which geopolitical expressions are influenced and constituted by pre-existing cultural imaginations and understandings. In sum, the study of critical geopolitics “is the study of the socio-cultural resources and rules by which geographies of international politics get written.”⁶⁶ The aim of critical geopolitics is, inherently, to be a practical and effective theoretical tool. The basic questions which critical geopolitics seeks to answer are: how is global space scripted by geopolitical thinkers, and how is this script informed by the geopolitical culture of the society in which it operates? Ó Tuathail defines the theory in the following terms:

Critical geopolitics is an intellectual move beyond political realism, and the god-tricks that characterize uncritical geopolitical narratives generally. It rejects state-centric and cognitively miserly stories about how the interstate system works. Most importantly, it recognizes that how people know, categorize and make sense of world politics is an interpretative cultural practice. To understand this process requires studying geopolitics as discourse and the cultural context that gives it meaning.⁶⁷

Critical geopolitics provides historians with a theoretical tool that assists in providing meaning to historical discussions of international relations. In this thesis, critical geopolitics is used to analyse the anti-oil movement’s geopolitical expressions, its geopolitical imaginations, and the geopolitical discourses in which the movement operated. It explores what communities Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement believed Britain belonged to, and how they defined ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘ours’ and ‘theirs,’ ‘here’ and ‘there.’

⁶⁵ Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, “Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy,” *Political Geography* 11, no. 2 (March 1992): 94.

⁶⁶ Ó Tuathail and Agnew, “Geopolitics and Discourse,” 96.

⁶⁷ Gearóid Ó Tuathail, “Thinking Critically About Geopolitics,” in Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby, and Paul Routledge (eds.), *The Geopolitics Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 7.

The historiographical lacuna on the subject of the debate over the Royal Navy's transition from coal to oil requires an extensive use of primary source material. This thesis has explored a variety of local and national sources, both printed and archival. The numerous publications of Captain Bernard Acworth have been consulted, including his published books, articles, lectures, and newspaper editorials. A portion of Acworth's materials were retrieved through inter-library loans, but the majority were consulted at the National Library of Wales and the Hugh Owen Library, both in Aberystwyth, Wales, and at Cardiff Central Library. An assortment of Acworth's unpublished and private materials have also been used. These were generously provided by his son, Reverend Richard Acworth, from his privately held collection in Havant, England. A diverse assortment of periodicals have also been consulted, including the *Naval Review*, the quarterly, independent professional journal of the Royal Navy. Its articles are conveniently accessible through a digitized archive.⁶⁸ The *Colliery Guardian and Journal of the Coal and Iron Trades* [hereafter the *Colliery Guardian*], a weekly trade publication that contains much editorial commentary on the coal to oil transition, has been used extensively and is available in its entirety at Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. The *Ocean and National Magazine*, a small, monthly publication of South Wales' Ocean and National collieries that contains commentary on the Back to Coal Movement, was consulted at the Glamorgan Records Office in Cardiff, Wales. Articles and editorials from the *Contemporary Review*, the *RUSI Journal*, and the *Royal Society of Arts Journal* have also been used to varying degrees. Local and national newspapers have been vital to

⁶⁸ Available at www.naval-review.org/archive.asp.

the research of this thesis. The *Western Mail*⁶⁹ (Cardiff) and the *South Wales Echo* (Cardiff) were consulted at the National Library of Wales and the Cardiff Central Library, respectively. Of particular value were two large collections of newspaper clippings on the coal to oil transition, which had been gathered from local, national, and international news publications. One collection is to be found at the Glamorgan Records Office; the other in the personal collection of Richard Acworth. *The Times* (London) has also been used extensively.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first will investigate the writings of Captain Bernard Acworth over the period 1926-1931 and will consider, in particular, the themes of foreignness and xenophobia, dependency and independency, and safety and danger that ran throughout his writings on oil. Chapter two will examine the Back to Coal Movement, beginning with its adoption of Acworth's anti-oil platform in the spring of 1931 and ending in the summer of 1933. The final chapter will consider the responses and resistances to the anti-oil campaign over the period 1927-1938. A leitmotif of the three chapters is the presence of fear; fear of the unknown, fear of the foreign, fear of change, and, most prominent, fear of the future.

⁶⁹ The largest local daily in Wales. See John Coslett, *History Behind the Headlines* (Cardiff: Western Mail & Echo Ltd, 1996).

Chapter I

Captain Bernard Acworth and the Creation of an Anti-Oil Critique, 1927-1930

Admiral Sir E.J.W. Slade did not mince his words: "There is one thing in the material world to-day which is of equal importance with food to civilized men, and that is fuel."⁷⁰ The Admiral's lecture to the Royal United Services Institute in November 1926, entitled "Oil Supplies in War," was both a warning and an appeal to his audience. Slade concluded that oil was the fuel of the future, and that Britain was, and would likely always be, reliant upon the "goodwill of other countries" in ensuring a consistent supply of the foreign fuel.⁷¹ Though he viewed Britain's fuel dilemma as a "matter of life or death," Slade was hopeful that a solution would eventually be found if the discussion and debate on the subject was expanded to a national, popular audience.⁷²

Another naval officer, Captain Bernard Acworth, was nearing the end of a long and prestigious naval career at the time of Slade's lecture.⁷³ Acworth had served through the most technologically progressive period of the Royal Navy's history, witnessing, among other things, the introduction of oil as the dominant source of fuel. Acworth joined the Royal Navy in 1900; a few years later he became one of the first generation of

⁷⁰ Sir E.J.W. Slade, "Oil Supplies in War," *RUSI Journal* 71, no. 481 (1926): 119. This lecture was followed by a discussion on turning coal into oil. See "Production of Oil from Coal," *RUSI Journal* 71, no. 481 (1926): 141-143. Slade, a former Director of Naval Intelligence, was one of two directors of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) appointed by the Admiralty, and in 1925 was Vice-Chairman of that company. See "Admiral Sir Edmond Slade. Oil Fuel for The Navy," *The Times* 23 January 1928, 17. G.G. Jones states that Slade was "arguably the most important – and controversial – figure behind the growth of APOC in the war years." See Jones, "The British Government and the Oil Companies 1912-1924: The Search for an Oil Policy," *Historical Journal* 20, no. 3 (September 1977): 658.

⁷¹ Slade, "Oil Supplies in War," 134.

⁷² Slade believed that the best solution to the oil issue was "to encourage private enterprise in the United Kingdom to bring out a commercially practicable retorting process in order to produce crude oil from our low value coals." Slade, "Oil Supplies in War," 140.

⁷³ See Image A, page 45.

British submariners and one of the first to use oil as a maritime fuel.⁷⁴ He served in the Mediterranean and the Far East, where he had gained firsthand experience with the remoteness of the Empire's oil fuel supplies and the increasingly complex relationships that were forming between the oil have and have-nots.⁷⁵ Like Slade, Acworth was deeply concerned about the Royal Navy's use of foreign oil.

Over the course of the years 1927-1930 Acworth developed a comprehensive critique of oil that questioned the geopolitical and social consequences of the Royal Navy's transition from coal to oil fuel. Acworth based his opposition to oil on three primary points of contention: its foreignness, its negative effects on British society and military power, and its risk to national security.⁷⁶ He disputed the conception that oil was a positive and progressive addition to British life. Acworth viewed oil as a foreign evil that was invading Britain, changing the ways its people lived and thought, and influencing the ways in which it conducted its domestic and international affairs. The most serious consequence of the Navy's transition to oil fuel, Acworth believed, was the change in the ways that the State conducted its foreign policy. The adoption of oil as the principal source of fuel for the Navy fundamentally altered the nation's existing networks of power and influence, and redefined which states were considered friendly or hostile.

⁷⁴ "A Famous Sea Fighter. Address to Business Club," *Western Mail*, 28 March 1931, 12. On the submarine service, see Antony Preston, *The Royal Navy Submarine Service: a Centennial History* (London: Conway Maritime, 2001).

⁷⁵ Acworth commanded a submarine to the South China Sea and during the First World War spent five months patrolling the Eastern Mediterranean. "A Famous Sea Fighter. Address to Business Club," *Western Mail*, 28 March 1931, 12.

⁷⁶ These elements formed the basis of Acworth's critique, but to these he also added a series of nuanced environmental, social and cultural arguments, as well. See for example, "Scientific Research," in *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1930): 113-121; "The Traffic Muddle," in *Back to the Coal Standard* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1932): 25-37; "Safety and Economy Needs," *Western Mail Trade Supplement*, 4 January 1932, 9; "Transport Problems and Their Solution," *Western Mail*, 14 November 1932, 12.

This chapter will explore Captain Bernard Acworth's commentary on oil, security, and international affairs over the period 1927-1931. It uses a critical geopolitics approach to analyse Acworth's phrasing, use of language, and allusions to popular culture. In doing so, this chapter will identify Acworth's geopolitical conceptions and imaginations of Britain, the geopolitical storylines he subscribed to and the different geopolitical discourses within which he operated.

Acworth presented his anti-oil message in a variety of ways. He began his career as a fuel critic by engaging with his professional community, namely the Royal Navy, writing to readers of naval policy and strategy in monographs, newspaper editorials, and the independent professional journal of the service, the *Naval Review*.⁷⁷ As he neared his retirement from the Royal Navy in February 1931, Acworth turned to publishing material for popular, civilian audiences. In both settings, he enframed his anti-oil message by skillfully employing an interesting variety of contrasting tropes such as 'alien' and 'patriot,' 'dependency' and 'independency,' 'unstable' and 'stable.' Acworth's books and articles on the subject of oil fuel posed searching questions of where the axes of power and conflict existed in an oil-fuelled world, what were the new dangers and threats that Britain faced, and what were the sources of Britain's strengths and weaknesses. His driving argument throughout the period 1927-1930 was that the use of oil would

⁷⁷ The *Naval Review* was the Royal Navy's quarterly, independent professional journal, which acted as a forum for discussion and debate on a variety of topics, naval and otherwise. Founded in 1912 by Captain H.W. Richmond (later Admiral and Master of Downing College, Cambridge) and eight other naval officers, the journal was, and remains, "a publication for private circulation to encourage junior officers to write and discuss matters of naval interest. It was especially intended to stimulate study and thought of the 'higher side' of the profession on the part of the younger officers." A.J. Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral: the Life of Sir Herbert Richmond* (Whitefish, Montana: Literary Licensing, 1952): 21. See also Basil H. Tripp, *Naval Review Index: Volumes 1-64, 1913-1976* (London: The Naval Review, 1978).

eventually lead to Britain's economic, social, and military decline, and that only through the return to the use of coal would the nation remain secure and strong in the future.

Acworth presented the first draft of his anti-oil position in *The Great Delusion: a Study of Aircraft in Peace and War*, which he published in 1927 using the pseudonym 'Neon.'⁷⁸ In a chapter entitled "Aircraft and Oil Fuel," Acworth questioned the logic of the Navy's reliance upon oil and challenged the statements that Admiral Slade had presented at his RUSI lecture in November 1926.⁷⁹ Oil was, to Acworth, the "firebrand of

⁷⁸ 'Neon' [Bernard Acworth], *The Great Delusion: a Study of Aircraft in Peace and War* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927). A book of 288 pages that discusses theories of flight, the usefulness of airships, and the poor logic of the British Government's subsidization of what Acworth viewed to be a failing airship industry. The author of *The Great Delusion* has been the subject of considerable confusion. The National Library of Wales' copy of the book has a handwritten note on the title page that states that the author is Marian Whitford Acworth, however, there is no evidence of how this was determined. Warwick Michael Brown also associates 'Neon' with Marian Whitford Acworth, who he states was Bernard Acworth's wife. In an article on *The Great Delusion* appearing on the internet blog Airminded, historian Brett Holman states that 'Neon' was likely Bernard Acworth, but could have potentially been Marian Whitford Acworth. Richard Acworth has confirmed that 'Neon' was, in fact, his father, Bernard Acworth. Marian Whitford Acworth was Bernard's cousin, who was interested in the subject of airships and airpower. Richard Acworth, Havant, U.K., 13 December 2011; Brett Holden, "Who Was Neon?" *Airminded: Airpower and British Society, 1908-1941* (28 April 2008). Available at: <http://airminded.org/2008/04/28/who-was-neon>. Acworth's authorship is also ascertainable through a comparison of publications authored using his own name. In a letter to the editor of *The Times* entitled "Airship Transport," on 6 August 1930, Acworth uses multiple phrases that appear in *The Great Delusion*. For example, "The truth of the matter is that airships, aeroplanes, birds, and insects are all equally, because absolutely, parasitical to a moving medium, just as is a fly flying in the enclosed but moving calm of an ocean liner; a scientific fact which must render all the great hopes of a commercial future for long-distance aerial transport illusory," also appears on page 14 of *The Great Delusion*. See Bernard Acworth, "Airship Transport," *The Times*, 6 August 1930, 6. Another letter to the editor of *The Times* on 15 August 1930 also includes phrases that appear in *The Great Delusion*. For example, "I do not agree that speed is a vital matter in commerce. Surely cheapness and reliability are the overruling factors," appears on page xxvii of *The Great Delusion*, and page 266 of Acworth, "The Coming Reformation," in *The Seven Pillars of Fire: A Symposium* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1936). See Bernard Acworth, "Airship Transport," *The Times*, 15 August 1930, 8. There are also many similarities between *The Great Delusion* and Acworth's later monographs. For example, "control in peace does not connote control in war; control in peace is financial, control in war is physical. We may have financial control of all things in the world, but when it comes to war we may find that we have not got control of any," which appears on page 239 of *The Great Delusion*, also appears on page 123 of Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1930), on page 25 of Acworth, *The Restoration of England's Sea Power* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1935), and on page 158 of Acworth, *Britain in Danger* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937).

⁷⁹ The chapter contains several direct quotations from Slade's RUSI lecture of November 1926, which suggests that Acworth either attended the lecture or read about it in the institute's monthly journal. The placement of the chapter at the end of the book suggests that Acworth possibly included it as an

the world,” and an unnecessary and aggravating addition to Britain’s already complex political, economic, and military relationships with foreign states.⁸⁰

In peace, Acworth felt that the nation was being drawn into complex and restricting financial agreements with oil-producing countries. In a future war, he predicted that Britain would become entangled in political and military alliances based on the supply of oil, rather than the national interest.⁸¹ Where Slade had presented these problems as hurdles to be overcome, Acworth viewed them as insurmountable obstacles. The use of oil was leading Britain down a path toward dependency, insecurity, and potential catastrophe: “The more petrol we use the more crude oil must we buy and import from abroad; the greater use of petrol and heavy oil as a source of power, the more are we relying on a foreign product largely controlled both as to price and quantity by foreigners.”⁸² The solution to Britain’s fuel dilemma was, to Acworth, obvious and easily achieved – Britain needed to free itself from the entanglements and risks of the international struggle for the control over the supplies of oil: “patriotism, commonsense, and self-interest [he wrote] conspire to show that we should discard the unnecessary use

afterthought, encouraged by Slade’s call for broader public discussion on the issue of fuel. Acworth cites Slade’s lecture twice in the chapter, and quotes the Admiral’s statement that Britain would have to “rely upon the goodwill of other countries” in securing its oil fuel supplies. Acworth, *Great Delusion*, 238.

⁸⁰ Acworth, *Great Delusion*, 237. Other authors during this period to suggest a correlation between energy resources and international disputes include Francis Delaisi, *Oil: its Influence on Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922); Isaac F. Marcossen, *The Black Golconda: the Romance of Petroleum* (New York: Harper, 1924), and Anton Mohr, *The Oil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926). Similar publications written in the 1930s include: H.C. Engelbrecht and Frank C. Hanighen, *Merchants of Death* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1934), and Frank C. Hanighen and Anton Zischka, *The Secret War: the War for Oil* (London: George Routledge, 1935).

⁸¹ Acworth, *Great Delusion*, 237.

⁸² Acworth, *Great Delusion*, 237.

of oil and utilise to the utmost the source of power we possess in such full measure – *the best coal in the world.*”⁸³

The Great Delusion was Acworth’s first foray into the British fuel debate, and in it he constructed his campaign against oil and his proposals for an alternative energy future. Using simplified geopolitical abstractions of ‘them’ and ‘us,’ ‘here’ and ‘there,’ ‘ours’ and ‘theirs,’ he presented the fuel issue in such a manner as to reduce the complexity of the consequences of oil into easily understood components of safety and danger – foreign (their) oil was a threat, domestic (our) coal was secure. Acworth’s geopolitical conception was that the international arena was a hierarchical system comprised of competing states with varying resource endowments. He imagined Britain as a uniquely independent and powerful country within this system, one that maintained the world’s largest navy and that possessed the world’s largest reserves of coal. Coal provided the nation with security and a freedom of action, Acworth believed, while on the other hand, the more oil Britain used, the greater its engagement with unfamiliar, unpredictable foreign states. The Navy’s decision to abandon the use of a local, secure fuel in exchange for the use of an expensive, distant, and insecure fuel was foolhardy: “action or policy in the realm of material things based on vague theories or false premises must inevitably lead to quackery,” he wrote, “and quackery on a great scale must lead to economic ruin.”⁸⁴

In the November 1928 issue of the *Naval Review*, Acworth published “In Bondage to Oil,” his first article dedicated exclusively to criticising the Navy’s use of

⁸³ Acworth, *Great Delusion*, 243-244. Italics in the original.

⁸⁴ Acworth, *Great Delusion*, 245.

foreign oil fuel.⁸⁵ The intensity of the critique in this article is markedly more aggressive than in *The Great Delusion*, and there is a perceptible anxiety in Acworth's prose. The purpose of the article, he wrote, was to "invite his fellow countryman to examine coolly the validity of the belief in the inevitable dawn of the 'Oil Age,' with all the terrible consequences for our country which such a hopeless dawn entails."⁸⁶ He sensed the dangers that oil posed as growing larger and becoming closer to Britain, no longer existing somewhere 'out there' in the international system. The ages of oil and coal had collided in Britain, he believed, and the contest between the two fuels would inevitably be decided there.

Acworth presented oil as an invader in "In Bondage to Oil." He conveyed the sense that the fuel was seeping into Britain, painting an image of an undefinable "Foreign" threat that was forcing its way into the country, taking British "hostages" in exchange for the nation's "Fortune."⁸⁷ Acworth capitalized the word 'foreigners' throughout this article, transforming the enemies that he perceived to be confronting Britain into an ambiguous, monolithic entity that was made more frightening by its lack of definition. The 'Oil Industry,' rather than foreign countries, was what Acworth

⁸⁵ 'Poseidon' [Bernard Acworth], "In Bondage to Oil," *Naval Review* 16, no. 4 (November 1928): 769-775. Acworth's authorship can be identified by comparing the content and expressions of the article to publications he wrote using his own name. His book *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, published in 1930, includes a chapter entitled "In Bondage to Oil," which is nearly identical in structure and prose to his article in the *Naval Review*. A comparison between the markedly similar discussions of science and progress on page 771 of "In Bondage to Oil," and in the chapter entitled "Scientific Research" in *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* is further evidence that Acworth was the author of both. See Bernard Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow: a Study of the Naval Crisis from Within* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1930): 113-121. Another book by Acworth, *Back to the Coal Standard*, includes discussions of science, progress, the coal industry, and Britain's future that are similar to those that appear in "In Bondage to Oil." See chapters entitled, "The Navy's Fuel – A Retrospect," "The Oil Empire," and "Looking Forward," in Bernard Acworth, *Back to the Coal Standard: the Future of Transport and Power* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1932).

⁸⁶ Acworth, "In Bondage to Oil," 769

⁸⁷ Acworth, "In Bondage to Oil," 770.

believed to be assailing the nation. He believed that British society had become hypnotized by oil as a result of an “insidious” campaign by the industry to “smother the innate good sense” of the average citizen.⁸⁸ Britain had been “bamboozled” by the oil industry and persuaded, if not compelled, into “letting go the substance of prosperity for the ridiculous fantasy of Dead Sea fruits.”⁸⁹ Acworth framed the industry as a “Moloch” that supplied the nation with oil – what he deemed to be a “great and cruel hoax” – in exchange for the sacrifices of British wealth, power, and safety.⁹⁰

Beyond the domestic implications of the use of oil, Acworth asserted that the Royal Navy’s dependence upon foreign fuel was becoming increasingly dangerous. For the first time in modern history, he believed, Britain had surrendered its independence and forfeited its ability to govern its engagements with the international community. Acworth believed that if the nation continued to rely upon foreign oil, “England’s word in the councils of the world must be hesitant and insincere, and may well be reduced to a bluff which foreign nations may unexpectedly call.”⁹¹ As in *The Great Delusion*, Acworth conceptualised the international system as a hierarchical structure of power, based upon the control of resources and the ability to marshal them in the exertion of

⁸⁸ Acworth, “In Bondage to Oil,” 771.

⁸⁹ Acworth, “In Bondage to Oil,” 772.

⁹⁰ Acworth, “In Bondage to Oil,” 769. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a Moloch is “a person or thing to which extreme or terrible sacrifices are made; a terrible or remorselessly destructive person or force.” “Moloch, n.,” OED Online, June 2012, Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/view/Entry/120955?redirectedFrom=moloch, (accessed July 29, 2012). Acworth’s thoughts on the oil industry’s incursion into Britain is in line with G.G. Jones’ assertion that the introduction of oil into the Royal Navy specifically, and into domestic life generally, was the product of a “forced technological diffusion” led by the sheer abundance of oil rather than by a technological need for it. Jones, “The Oil-Fuel Market in Britain 1900-1914: a Lost Cause Revisited,” *Business History* 20, no. 2 (July 1978): 135.

⁹¹ Acworth, “In Bondage to Oil,” 770.

force. The Navy had tied itself “to the skirts” of foreign countries, he felt, and had jeopardised the nation’s security.

Acworth’s framing of oil as an unwanted, unhealthy, and dangerous substance rendered coal, by default, in opposite terms. As he described oil as a foreign invader, he concurrently portrayed coal as a defensive, resisting substance. He subscribed to the belief that Britain was founded upon and sustained by coal. Using tropes of loyalty and patriotism, Acworth argued that coal was not merely a convenient local fuel, but “the natural food and life-blood” of Britain, and the basis of its “true material self.”⁹² Employing these nationalistic imageries, Acworth portrayed coal as a biological entity that was, in his imagination, a commodity that coursed through the nation and sustained its political, economic, and cultural life.⁹³ In Acworth’s biological metaphor, oil was a poisonous foreign transfusion that was weakening Britain. Using these metaphors of coal as the blood of Britain, Acworth noticeably increased the senses of danger and immediacy that were present in *The Great Delusion*. Returning to the use of coal was no longer a *choice* based upon patriotic common-sense; it was now a *necessity* for national survival. “Is it not time to put all pseudo-scientific will-o’-the-wisps away from us, [Acworth wrote] and to treat oil with that suspicion and dislike which, if insular, is at least healthy and hearty.”⁹⁴

⁹² Acworth, “In Bondage to Oil,” 775. The term ‘life-blood’ of Britain was also used to describe coal in Michael Lewis, *The History of the Royal Navy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957): 256.

⁹³ This conception of coal as a constitutive part of British culture was a traditional component of national narratives of the coal industry during the interwar period. See Michael Asteris, “The Rise and Decline of South Wales Coal Exports, 1870-1930,” *Welsh History Review* 13 (1986/1987): 24-43. For an historical example, see *Royal Commission on the Coal Industry*, Cmd. 2600 (1925): 3. “The paramount importance of the coal mining industry in the economic and social life of this country is a commonplace.”

⁹⁴ Acworth, “In Bondage to Oil,” 774.

In “In Bondage to Oil,” Acworth drew upon an existing cultural narrative to drive home his arguments against oil. Quoting Shakespeare’s *King John*, Acworth alluded to Richard the Lion-Hearted’s struggles with foreign usurpation and his quest for independence: “Come the three corners of the world in arms, and we shall shock them; nought shall make us rue if England to itself do rest but true.”⁹⁵ By using this literary allusion, Acworth creates a sense of imminent and perpetual danger from the ‘three corners of the world,’ which were sending ‘their’ armies, in the form of oil, to usurp Britain’s ‘true’ leader – Old King Coal.⁹⁶ Acworth presented a storyline of Britain under siege, and he called for the nation to unite in resisting the oily invader. Only through the use of coal, which he perceived to be Britain’s “natural” and God-given bounty, could the nation ensure its independence and strength in the future.

Acworth’s geopolitical imagination in “In Bondage to Oil” was that Britain was under attack from foreign entities that were attempting to invade the country, usurp its traditional structures of power, and poison its people. To convey his anti-oil message and to enhance its effectiveness, he used narratives that were familiar to his audience and that drew upon the nation’s shared historical experiences with invasion and occupation. He constructed a dichotomy of oil as a vile and toxic foreign substance, and coal as a natural, healthy, and domestic substance. Oil, and its use in the Navy and more generally in British society and by the British public, was both disgusting and dangerous to Acworth:

⁹⁵ Acworth, “In Bondage to Oil,” 775; William Shakespeare, *King John*, Scene 5, Act 7, Line 122. This line is spoken by Philip Faulconbridge, whose fictional character – a misunderstood and outspoken pariah – is decidedly similar to Acworth.

⁹⁶ Imagining coal as a ‘king’ was a common cultural practice during the 1930s. Acworth uses the metaphor on page 772 of “In Bondage to Oil.” See also Upton Sinclair, *King Coal* (New York: Sinclair, 1917); Tony Hall, *King Coal: Miners, Coal and Britain’s Industrial Future* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), and Jules Pinschewer, *King Coal* (National Coal Board Film Unit (UK), 1948), 35 mm slides, 3 minutes.

“The closer we look the more unpleasant is the view; the nastier the taste, the more evil the smell.”⁹⁷

Acworth’s participation in the naval fuel debate during this period was part of a growing national discussion on energy and security. As Britain’s consumption of oil in military, industrial, and domestic applications continued to increase at the turn of the decade, debate over the consequences of the nation’s foreign fuel policy expanded into new civilian realms. Oil remained a topic of conversation in the lecture halls of learned societies and in naval circles, but these official and academic discussions persisted in viewing the issue as a technical, scientific, or bureaucratic dilemma.⁹⁸ Oil was also seen by many operating within this discourse as ‘their’ issue, one that only they could understand and solve. In his RUSI lecture in 1926, Admiral Slade had commented;

There lies a serious risk in the fact that the British public do not realise to the full the probability of a shortage of this fuel, because the average ‘man in the street’ is an unimaginative creature and without practical demonstration he finds it almost impossible to appreciate the consequences of a shortage of petroleum, and he is therefore liable to minimize its probable effects in war, particularly if it is going to cost him money to provide against the possibility of such a shortage.⁹⁹

The most noticeable site of growth in the use of oil, however, was in the domestic sphere. In the late 1920s the major oil companies, such as Shell and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, began to bombard British society with advertisements, pamphlets, and books.¹⁰⁰ National newspapers, in particular, were filled with advertisements for oil, often

⁹⁷ Acworth, “In Bondage to Oil,” 772.

⁹⁸ See for example J.H. Jones, “The Present Position of the British Coal Trade,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 93, no. 1 (1930): 1-63.

⁹⁹ Slade, “Oil Supplies in War,” 121.

¹⁰⁰ Jones, “The Oil-Fuel Market in Britain,” 136. Jones cites as an example a “lavishly illustrated book published by Anglo-Mexican on *Mexican Fuel Oil* (1914).”

depicted in images, stories, and metaphors that made the fuel appear futuristic.¹⁰¹ The publicity campaign seems to have worked, and as Acworth had predicted, Britain as a whole became increasingly hooked on, if not addicted, to oil. From 1926 to 1928, Britain's imports of oil increased by 27.8 percent.¹⁰² At the same time, the domestic coal industry, a staple component of the nation's industrial sector and a major generator of public and private revenue, was struggling to survive as a result of the incursion of oil. Admiralty contracts for steaming coal from South Wales fell by nearly 85% during the 1920s.¹⁰³ Between 1914 and 1929, the vessels of the world's merchant fleets using coal decreased from 97% to 61%, while diesel and oil powered vessels increased from 3.5% to 39%.¹⁰⁴

By the end of the 1920s, the use of oil was no longer a narrowly defined issue of policy and technical efficiency – it had become a decidedly national concern. The dramatic new developments in the use of oil and coal became topics of debate in a variety of new public sites of discussion. Concerns about the Navy and the security of Britain's future were raised in *The Times* and other national newspapers, and in semi-official monographs.¹⁰⁵ In coal industry publications, such as the *Colliery Guardian* and the *Ocean and National Magazine* in particular, oil and its effects upon the nation were being

¹⁰¹ Between 6 February 1926 and 27 December 1929, eight oil companies ran over 150 advertisements for domestic oil use in *The Times*, 69 of which were from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company/British Petroleum Company. See, for example, *The Times*, 6 February 1926, 6; April 12 1927, 5; 24 February 1928, 13; 27 December 1929, 9.

¹⁰² J.H. Jones, *The Coal-Mining Industry: An International Study in Planning* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1939): 188. British oil imports in millions of tons: 1926 – 2.05; 1928 – 2.62. From 1914 to 1930, Britain's imports of oil increased by 480 percent, from 2.5 to 12 million tons.

¹⁰³ "The Navy & Welsh Coal," *Western Mail*, 24 July 1931, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Fletcher, "From Coal to Oil in British Shipping," 8.

¹⁰⁵ See for example, Lord Aberconway, *The Basic Industries of Great Britain* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927); "The Fuel of the Navy: Vice Admiral Skelton on Petroleum," *The Times*, 4 October 1928, 7; "The Future of Oil Supply," *The Times*, 3 April 1929, 12.

comprehensively reassessed, and questions about oil's influence on industry, trade, the economy, international relations, and national security were being asked. Articles such as "The Past and the Future" and "Oil v. Coal," appearing in the *Colliery Guardian*, and "Coal – Its Importance to the Industries of the World," appearing in the *Ocean and National*, introduced the fuel debate to local, popular audiences that were becoming acutely aware of the consequences of Britain's abandonment of coal for oil.¹⁰⁶

Acworth gravitated toward the expanding public sites of discussion on fuel and security. In 1930, he published *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow: a Study of the Naval Crisis from Within*.¹⁰⁷ The book was a comprehensive treatise on a variety of naval policies that Acworth believed to be misguided, including the decision to persist in the use of foreign oil. Acworth's use of 'from within' in the title of his book illustrates that he still felt part of the naval community, and saw himself as an active participant in the discussions concerning naval issues in general, and fuel security in particular. Yet, Acworth was also attempting in this book to reveal to a civilian audience the internal 'crisis' that he saw unfolding before him, which he viewed as "sufficiently serious to stir into action any man who can grasp realities."¹⁰⁸ From his position 'within,' Acworth endeavored to educate and warn those interested parties on the 'outside':

¹⁰⁶ See for example, "The Past and the Future," *Colliery Guardian* (11 April 1930): 1394-6; "Oil v. Coal," *Colliery Guardian* (17 April 1930): 1503; "Fuel Research: A New Policy," *Colliery Guardian* (24 December 1930): 2356-7; "Coal – Its Importance to the Industries of the World," *Ocean and National* 1, no. 1 (April 1928): 4. The *Colliery Guardian* also took note of oil's negative influence in other parts of the Empire. See "Canada. Depression in British Columbia Due to Oil," *Colliery Guardian* (14 March 1930): 1034.

¹⁰⁷ Bernard Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow: A Study of the Naval Crisis from Within* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1930). A book of 277 pages organized into 27 chapters, including "Lessons of the War Misapplied," "Scientific Research," and "The Foundations of Strategy."

¹⁰⁸ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 124.

The crisis from within is for the most part the cause of the crisis without, so that we professional seamen cannot exonerate ourselves from grave responsibility for those doubts and misgivings which seem to be sapping the countries quiet and steady faith in the future sureness of her naval shield.¹⁰⁹

This passage suggests that Acworth felt responsible, both personally and as a member of the naval profession, for Britain's national security anxieties. He perceived a reduction in national morale as a result of the Navy's weakening international position, and he imagined the Admiralty's lack of disclosure on contemporary naval matters was the cause of such distress. *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* was Acworth's attempt to take his anti-oil critique to a national, public, audience, and to blow the whistle on what he understood to be the Admiralty's fateful policies.¹¹⁰

Though writing for a new popular audience that perceived the oil dilemma in markedly different ways than the naval community, Acworth did not stray from the core arguments of his campaign – the foreignness of oil, its negative social and industrial consequences, and the national security risks that it posed. In *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* he continued to evoke images of oil as a corrosive invader that was fundamentally, and negatively, altering British life. He was alarmed by the incursion of corporate interests into the British political system, and felt his country was under attack from an “oily octopus” that was, with its “tentacles,” methodically dismantling Britain's traditional democratic structures of power, corrupting its political system, and meddling

¹⁰⁹ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, xii-xiii.

¹¹⁰ Jones asserts that the British government's oil policies of the interwar period were the “product of a convergence of uncoordinated policies pursued by different government departments stimulated into action by the persistent lobbying of APOC.” Jones, “The British Government and the Oil Companies,” 653.

with its internal affairs.¹¹¹ “The substitution of foreign oil for British coal as the life-blood of English sea-power, and progressively of industrial enterprise,” Acworth wrote, “had disfigured British society at home and sapped its power abroad.”¹¹²

A new addition to Acworth’s anti-oil campaign in *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* was his identification of Britain’s foreign enemies. In *The Great Delusion* and “In Bondage to Oil,” Acworth had portrayed the sources of danger associated with oil in ambiguous terms. He presented oil as an invasive, alien substance and he represented Britain’s external enemies by using the generalised term ‘Foreigners.’¹¹³ In *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, however, Acworth defined a clearer picture of the foreign threats that Britain was facing. He directed his attacks increasingly toward the specific states that supplied oil to Britain, and argued that their control over the nation’s civilian and military activities was what made oil dangerous.¹¹⁴ Britain’s primary supplier of oil was the United States, which produced over 75 percent of the world’s total oil, and which supplied 30 percent of the Navy’s fuel in 1930.¹¹⁵ In the aggregate, over 60 percent of Britain’s oil fuel came from sources in the Western Hemisphere.¹¹⁶ Though Acworth identified the United States as a British ally, he warned that “if America places an embargo on our fuel from North and South America,” in peace or in war, the Royal Navy

¹¹¹ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 127. Churchill had also referred to the Shell Oil Company as an octopus in 1913. As Jones has written, it was in the early 1930s that “Government departments and commissions were practically besieged by oil companies seeking to involve the State in their affairs,” particularly by “the most successful pleader of them all,” the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, whose director, Charles Greenway, claimed it to be “virtually a Government department” during the interwar period. See Jones, “The British Government and the Oil Companies,” 638, 671.

¹¹² Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 123.

¹¹³ See for example, *Great Delusion*, 238; “In Bondage to Oil,” 770, 773, 774.

¹¹⁴ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 124.

¹¹⁵ J.S.S. Brame, “Power Fuel for the Services,” *RUSI Journal* 76, no. 501 (January 1931): 77.

¹¹⁶ “Fuel for the Navy,” *Naval Review* 25, no. 3 (August 1937): 453.

would be crippled and the nation's domestic and industrial life would grind to a halt.¹¹⁷

"Those who, from sheer necessity, pooh-pooh our bondage to America and cosmopolitan Jews will doubtless point to Persia and Irak as providing a satisfactory and adequate source of supply in case of emergency," he wrote.¹¹⁸ Acworth, however, was not assuaged by the British government's financial control of Middle Eastern oilfields, which he deemed as being more unstable and vulnerable to disruption than any in the United States or South America. "A handful of those Arabs, whom we have systematically persecuted with bombs from on high, could put our Asiatic oil supplies out of action in a moment by destroying the [local] pipe-lines," he concluded.¹¹⁹ The nation's meddling in the Middle East had created a "concession plague-spot," he argued, whose "alien" inhabitants could "cause the oil to flow, not into British tankers, but into the desert sands."¹²⁰

Acworth believed that the consequences of Britain's use of foreign oil would be disastrous, and he presented a storyline in *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* that narrated the nation's future in the age of oil. He foresaw the Navy requiring an ever-increasing amount of liquid fuel as it was forced to expand to accommodate the demands of protecting Britain's seaborne supply routes. "The greater the Navy the greater the oil

¹¹⁷ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 123.

¹¹⁸ Acworth's Jewish comment is, most likely, a reference to Marcus Samuel, founder and director of the Shell Transport and Trading Company. Many proponents of oil argued during this period that Britain's reliance upon American oil was mitigated by the state's controlling share in APOC and its ownership of Middle Eastern oil fields. See Sir E.J.W. Slade, "Oil Supplies in War," *RUSI Journal* 71, no. 481 (1926): 119-142; G.M. Ross, "Imported Oil or Native Coal?" *RUSI Journal* 72, no. 485 (1927): 137-143; E.T. d'Eyncourt, "Fuel for Ships," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 77, no. 3973 (January 1929): 212-221.

¹¹⁹ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 125. Oil produced by APOC in the Middle East travelled by pipeline from the refineries in Baku, Azerbaijan, through Persia, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, where it was loaded on to oil tankers at the port of Tripoli. The overland journey was over 400 kilometres through harsh desert and rugged mountains. See Donald Ewalt, "The Fight for Oil: Britain in Persia, 1919," *History Today* 31, no. 9 (September 1981): 11-17.

¹²⁰ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 141-2.

requirements,” he wrote, “and the greater therefore the hold of foreigners on our freedom of policy in time of peace, and of action in war.”¹²¹ The Navy’s dependence on foreign countries would eventually paralyze its ability to act autonomously, and would, in turn, diminish the nation’s power and reach in the international community. “Here is a bondage indeed,” Acworth lamented, “for the necessarily greatest sea-power!”¹²² Acworth concluded *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* with a dire prediction for the future of the Navy and the nation. Britain’s use of oil and its reliance upon unpredictable and unstable foreign states portended an unprecedented catastrophe:

‘The next war’ must, it is argued, extinguish Western civilisation as the late war nearly did. . . we are in a dilemma indeed, for we must perish quickly if we defend the right, and slowly but inevitably if we compound with evil. We have become, if the premise is correct, a nation with fatalism as its only possible creed. We are assenting to the doctrine that matter has triumphed over mind, that good must succumb to evil if sufficiently strong, and that we of this distraught twentieth century have become the slaves and not the masters of our fate.¹²³

Acworth’s geopolitical conception of the international system in *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* was that the world was an inherently chaotic and violent place. He held no faith in the strength of treaties, agreements, or alliances, and he presented a geopolitical storyline that argued that Britain would inevitably be drawn into conflict with competing states. In his realist view of the world, Britain possessed short term friends and allies, but all were cast as potential enemies. From this perspective, Acworth demanded that Britain’s dominant source of fuel must be governed by absolute security of supply under all conditions. Britain would only be prepared to fight the next war if it was independent and self-sustaining.

¹²¹ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 128.

¹²² Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 124.

¹²³ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 265.

The most noticeable change in Acworth's writings over the period from 1928 to 1931 was his optimism for finding a solution to what he saw as an approaching catastrophe. In *The Great Delusion*, Acworth enframed the use of oil as a choice based upon common sense and patriotism – oil was foreign, unfamiliar, and insecure; coal was domestic, traditional, and safe. “We can still, if we will, be masters of our material and arbiters of our fate,” he wrote, suggesting that Britain could avoid the negative consequences of oil if it returned to the use of coal.¹²⁴ In his article, “In Bondage to Oil,” Acworth shifted to arguing that the use of oil, and the consequent abandonment of coal, was sapping the nation of its strength and causing industrial, economic, and social deterioration. He persisted in asserting that coal was a vibrant and constitutive component of British life: “Let us leave the unhealthy associations of Oil and come out into the bright light of an English day, in which Coal receives us with his healthy, hearty, and honest smile.”¹²⁵ By the time he wrote *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* in 1930, Acworth's tenor had changed dramatically, and he asserted that Britain's “strategical, political, and economic servitude” to foreigners portended the country's defeat: “‘The next war’ must, it is argued, extinguish Western civilisation as the last war very nearly

¹²⁴ Acworth, *The Great Delusion*, 244.

¹²⁵ Acworth, “In Bondage to Oil,” 772. The candidness and intensity of Acworth's pseudonymous publications are refreshing when compared to official literature on similar topics. See for example Sir E.J.W. Slade, “Production of Oil From Coal,” *RUSI Journal* 71, no. 481 (1926): 141-143; Frank Hodges, “The Economics of the Coal Industry,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 74, no. 3844 (July, 1926): 844-854. For a particularly numbing example, see A.E. Dunstan, A.W. Nash, and Sir H. Tizard (eds.), *The Science of Petroleum: a Comprehensive Treatise of the Principles and Practice of the Production, Refining, Transport and Distribution of Mineral Oil*, Vols. 1-6 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938-1953).

did.”¹²⁶ His solution to the oil dilemma remained consistent throughout his three publications: a national return to the use of British coal.

Acworth’s writings on oil were examples of geopolitical expression, founded upon his understandings and analyses of the international system and Britain’s place within it. His campaign against oil was an effort to interpret Britain’s geographical position, its resource endowment, and the interplay between them.¹²⁷ He endeavoured to make the relationships between oil, Britain, and the international system meaningful and comprehensible to his audiences. To do so, he created a storyline of how Britain’s future in the age of oil would progress, presenting two paths forward, one based upon the use of oil, and one upon the use of coal. Employing a variety of metaphors and drawing upon a set of pre-existing national narratives, Acworth created a unique image of Britain and its place in the international system, one that he hoped would become an accepted addition to existing understandings of Britain and its geopolitical power.

An analysis of Acworth’s expressions, use of language, and the metaphors that he employed reveals that he was a part of a geopolitical culture that was based upon a rigid definition of Britain as a unique, independent, and powerful nation. He structured his conception of the international system around essentialized oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ the ‘civilized’ and the ‘fanatical.’¹²⁸ Acworth’s anti-oil message was characterised by polarized distinctions between good and evil, self and other, and our

¹²⁶ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 136, 265.

¹²⁷ Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby, and Paul Routledge, *The Geopolitics Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 7.

¹²⁸ Ó Tuathail, Dalby, and Routledge, *Geopolitics Reader*, 2.

space and their space.¹²⁹ He imagined Britain as great power in all respects – economic, industrial, military, political, social, and moral – and defined the nation by superlatives such as ‘the most,’ ‘the best,’ and ‘the only.’¹³⁰ From this perspective, Acworth viewed the Navy’s dependence upon states that he deemed inferior as not only contemptible, but fatal.

Acworth’s anti-oil concerns were expressed in two varieties of geopolitical discourses during the period. *The Great Delusion* and “In Bondage to Oil” were contributions to a formal discourse, as they were written for a narrow, professional naval audience, and focused on issues of national policy and grand strategy. His anonymity and the radicalness of his proposals did not provide Acworth with much discursive power in this setting, however, and he was unsuccessful in generating any support or enthusiasm for his arguments.¹³¹ As he reflected later, he felt that within his close, professional naval community, he had been isolated and distressed – “a pelican in the wilderness.”¹³²

Acworth transitioned from a formal to a popular geopolitical discourse with *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, which was written for a civilian audience. He moved

¹²⁹ See ‘Critical Geopolitics,’ in Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 57-74.

¹³⁰ See for example, *Great Delusion*, 244; “In Bondage to Oil,” 774; *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 126.

¹³¹ The only response to the arguments presented in Acworth’s first two publications was Admiral Murray F. Sueter’s book on flight and aircraft, where he launched a scathing attack on the conclusions made in *The Great Delusion* and dismissed ‘Neon’ as a fear mongering ‘Noah.’ Sir Murray F. Sueter, *Airmen or Noahs?* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1928). Sueter served in the submarine service in 1902, around the same time as Acworth, and was later a significant contributor to the development of the Navy’s airship programme. By 1928 he was a Rear-Admiral and Conservative MP for Hertford, and was considered an aircraft expert. Peter Kemp, “Sueter, Sir Murray Frazer (1872–1960),” Robert Brown in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/36368>, (accessed July 29, 2012).

¹³² Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 139. Acworth’s pelican reference alludes to Psalm 102 which reads “By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin. I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert.” King James Bible, Psalm 102, verses 5-6.

away from discussions of naval policy and toward broader, more ideologically based arguments that referred to the social and cultural consequences of oil.¹³³ Acworth began to employ a series of metaphors and narratives in *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow* in an attempt to make the oil issue more familiar and understandable to a popular audience. He changed the framing of his arguments against oil as well, most noticeably in the ways he went from discussing oil as a naval or professional problem to discussing it as a national, social concern. His anti-oil message for the general public focused on the economic, political, and cultural consequences of liquid fuel. Acworth did not see the use of oil as an issue of policy or operational effectiveness, but rather, as one that affected the nation's character, its prosperity, and, most importantly, its security. In Acworth's narrative, the national interest was jeopardised by the Navy's use of oil.

While on the surface Acworth's anti-oil message focussed on the examination of the coal versus oil question, the undercurrents of his arguments grappled with deeper questions of nationalism versus internationalism, power versus weakness, freedom versus limitation, necessity versus frivolity, and insularity versus globalization. His writings during the years 1927-1930 identified the disadvantages of foreign oil and the benefits of native coal. In doing so, Acworth challenged Britain's comfortable dependency upon the other, the alien, the unnatural, and the dangerous.

¹³³ Ó Tuathail, Dalby, and Routledge, *Geopolitics Reader*, 9.

Image A: Captain Bernard Acworth, D.S.O., R.N. (circa 1926)

Source: Acworth Private Papers, Havant, U.K.

Chapter II

Making the Nation Coal Conscious: The Back to Coal Movement and the Development of Energy Awareness, 1931-1933

On the evening of 30 March 1931, Captain Bernard Acworth arrived at the coal exporting city of Cardiff, the capital of Wales, to deliver an address on “The Navy’s Fuel.”¹³⁴ The Cardiff Business Club had filled its lecture hall with over 300 local industrialists, businessmen, and politicians, who had been promised by a local newspaper “one of the most interesting addresses delivered to Cardiff for very many years.”¹³⁵ Indeed, Acworth’s address had an enormous impact on the audience, who in the following months and years transformed the region into one of the most active centres of debate on the national fuel issue.¹³⁶

The controversy over Britain’s dependence on foreign oil united the coal producing area of South Wales, bringing together miners and mine owners, shipbuilders and exporters, unions, and local government in unprecedented ways. From 1931 to 1933 the region’s industrial, commercial, and political communities took up a series of campaigns against the use of oil in Britain. Like Acworth, these bodies viewed oil as a threat to the nation’s future and believed that a widespread return to the use of coal, particularly in the navy, would increase Britain’s security and resolve its economic and social problems. The Back to Coal Movement was the most active and vocal component

¹³⁴ Cardiff Business Club, *Leading Speakers – Sessions 1922-1937* (Cardiff: Cardiff Business Club, 1937).

¹³⁵ “Cardiff Business Club. Capt. Bernard Acworth to Deliver Address,” *Western Mail*, 19 March 1931, 11.

¹³⁶ Acworth’s address was widely reported on in the Welsh media. See for example, “Back to Coal,” *Western Mail*, 31 March 1931, 6; “Welsh Coal for the Navy. An Industry’s Fight for Life. What Are the Miners’ M.P.s Going to Do?” *Western Mail*, 1 April 1931, 6; “Welsh Coal for the Navy,” *Western Mail*, 2 April 1931, 6; “Admiralty and Coal,” *Western Mail*, 2 April 1931, 7; “The Admiralty and Welsh Coal,” *Western Mail*, 4 April 1931, 8; “Welsh Coal for the Navy. Oil-Burning Ships a Danger to the Nation,” *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 4 April 1931, 3; “Back to Coal,” *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 4 April 1931, 6; “King Coal’s Challenge: Deputation to the Admiralty,” *Western Mail*, 4 April 1931, 9; “Coal Best for the Navy. Changes Since Oil was Adopted. Tour Suggestion to Capt. Acworth,” *Western Mail*, 6 April 1931, 6; “Admiralty Coal,” *Colliery Guardian* (10 April 1931): 1292.

of the South Wales anti-oil coalition. Representing the full range of Welsh society, the organization was in the vanguard of the region's participation in the national fuel debate.

This chapter will examine the rise of the Back to Coal Movement, following its efforts to expand its ranks, negotiate with policymakers in London and engage with local, popular audiences in Wales. The movement undertook a series of lobbying and publicity campaigns in England and Wales between 1931 and 1933, promoting the use of coal and resisting the use of oil in Britain generally and by the Royal Navy in particular. This chapter will focus on the composition of the Back to Coal Movement's anti-oil message. What did the organization consider to be dangerous about oil? Where did it locate the enemies of coal, both foreign and domestic? In what ways did it express its concerns about the nation's future?

To answer these questions the chapter will focus on the local media coverage of the fuel campaign in South Wales. The Back to Coal Movement strove to have a presence in every corner of Wales, and its executive members had considerable powers of influence. As such, the movement and its activities were widely covered in the South Wales media. The region's largest newspaper, the *Western Mail*, played an important role in fostering debate over the fuel issue in South Wales, offering its pages as a forum for public discussion and analysis.¹³⁷ The paper was also a firm supporter of Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement, and acted as the unofficial organ of the South Wales pro-coal/anti-oil campaign. The coverage of the fuel debate in the *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times* will also be analysed. This paper was a sister publication of the *Western Mail*, and

¹³⁷ The *Western Mail* was a conservative leaning paper that covered Welsh, national, and international affairs. John Cosslett, *History Behind the Headlines* (Cardiff: Western Mail & Echo, 1996): 7.

was circulated on Saturdays in the greater Cardiff region.¹³⁸ Though it only reported on the Back to Coal Movement's major announcements and events, it produced a number of political cartoons that offer a vital visual representation of the fuel debate. The *Colliery Guardian*, one of the largest weekly journals of the coal trade in Britain, contributed much to the pro-coal voice. The journal was particularly concerned about the strength of the coal industry in South Wales, and saw the Back to Coal Movement as a critical component in a larger global struggle between coal and oil. The *Ocean and National*, an illustrated monthly magazine created in April 1928 by the Ocean Coal Company and United National Collieries, was another early supporter of the Back to Coal Movement.¹³⁹ Circulating amongst over 6000 coalminers, the magazine was an ideal vehicle for the Back to Coal Movement to communicate its message to the grassroots.

Acworth's address to the Cardiff Business Club was a synthesis of the anti-oil arguments he had been developing for some five years and, as in his earlier works, he presented his audience with a triptych storyline of Britain's past, present, and future. On that March night in Cardiff, he began by narrating the nation's historical experiences with fuel, claiming that Britain had become the world's premier manufacturing, trading, and military power because of its large endowment of high quality coal. The nation and the Navy had grown strong using coal, but the desire for speed and endurance had led the latter to abandon the use of coal in favour of foreign oil, at the expense of the British coal

¹³⁸ The *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, also a conservative paper, included local and national news coverage, an agricultural section, a funny page, and a large editorial section. Geraint Talfan Davies, "The Capital Makes News," in Stewart Williams (ed.), *The Cardiff Book*, Vol. 2 (Glamorgan, Wales: Stewart Williams, 1974): 37.

¹³⁹ The magazine, whose motto was "finis coronat opus" ('the end crowns the work'), published scientific articles, developments in the industry, national and international news, and miner's poetry, songs, and short stories. The purpose of the magazine was stated by its editors in the inaugural issue: "A magazine associated with an industry vitally dependent upon one raw material should aim at cultivating a desire on the part of its readers to become familiar with its chief features." "Coal – Its Importance to the Industries of the World," *Ocean and National* 1, no. 1 (April 1928): 4.

industry and the national interest. Acworth argued that the Admiralty's inter-war fascination with technology and progress had created a rift between the nation's "sure shield" and its "life-blood," which was both strategically dangerous and socially destructive.¹⁴⁰

Acworth was anxious about the coming of the Oil Age in Britain, and the future that he projected to his audience was characterised by a pervasive sense of fear. The Navy, though perhaps faster than its coal-burning contemporaries, would no longer be a useful tool for combat or diplomacy, as it "could not move a propeller without the permission of foreigners."¹⁴¹ Acworth, always the cynical realist who viewed the international system as a chaotic and violent arena, had little faith in the durability of Britain's international alliances, and was confident that if a future conflict were to erupt, the nation would find itself disconnected from its supplies of oil. Britain's domestic use of oil also concerned Acworth: he held that the wealthy and powerful international oil industry was undermining Britain's political institutions, corroding its industries, and generally "bamboozling" its citizens.¹⁴² For Acworth, oil was a toxic foreign substance that was making the nation ill: "coal was clean and oil was foul. Oil was a poison compared with coal."¹⁴³ Combining the domestic and international consequences of oil, Acworth's conclusion was that the Admiralty's reliance on foreign oil had put the nation on a course toward dependency, weakness, and insecurity. Acworth finished his address

¹⁴⁰ "Welsh Coal for Navy. Oil-Burning Ships a Danger to the Nation," *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 4 April 1931, 3.

¹⁴¹ "Notes from the Coal Fields," *Colliery Guardian* (10 April 1931): 1307. Quoted from Acworth's lecture. The reports appearing in the 'Notes from the Coal Fields' section were unattributed.

¹⁴² "A Famous Sea Fighter. Address to Business Club," *Western Mail*, 28 March 1931, 12.

¹⁴³ "Notes from the Coal Fields," *Colliery Guardian* (10 April 1931): 1307. Quoted from Acworth's lecture.

with a proposal to consider a different energy trajectory for Britain – one that embraced coal and that was confident, independent, secure and stable.¹⁴⁴

Acworth's address was followed by a brief question and answer period, during which a half-dozen discussants expressed their thoughts on the fuel issue. "The country has gone mad on oil," agreed one businessman, while others asked technical and scientific questions.¹⁴⁵ Acworth left his audience with a call for all those in attendance to go forth and make the rejection of oil their "ruling policy."¹⁴⁶

South Wales was fertile ground for Acworth's anti-oil campaign. The region's staple industries, coal and steel, were struggling to be profitable and unemployment had been exceptionally high for some time.¹⁴⁷ Nineteen thirteen was the most successful year in the coal industry's history, but from 1919 onward the Welsh coal trade declined steadily.¹⁴⁸ Nineteen thirty was one of the industry's most difficult years.¹⁴⁹ To David Davies, president of Ocean Coal, that year was one that would "go down in the annals of the coal trade and in the history of Ocean as one of the most disastrous on record."¹⁵⁰ To

¹⁴⁴ "Welsh Coal for the Navy. Oil-Burning Ships a Danger to the Nation," *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 4 April 1931, 3.

¹⁴⁵ "Notes from the Coal Fields," *Colliery Guardian* (10 April 1931): 1307; "Back to Coal," *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 4 April 1931, 6.

¹⁴⁶ "Back to Coal," *Western Mail*, 31 March 1931, 6.

¹⁴⁷ "Unemployment in Mines," *Colliery Guardian* (16 January 1931): 217; "World Production of Coal in 1930," *Colliery Guardian* (24 April 1931): 1497.

¹⁴⁸ Michael Asteris, "The Rise and Decline of South Wales Coal Exports, 1870-1930," *Welsh History Review* 13 (1986/1987): 41.

¹⁴⁹ In the fall, many large colliery owners found their market shares reduced when they were forced by the Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald to accept the Coal Mines Act, a bill which attempted to regulate the industry through supply management systems. The Act, which had insufficient power of enforcement, did little to streamline the industry and much in fostering discontent between miners and owners. See Barry Supple, "Coal in the 1930s: the First Lame Duck?" *Bulletin of the Centre for Economic Policy Research* 15 (June 1986): np.

¹⁵⁰ David Davies, "Christmas Message," *Ocean and National* 3, no. 12 (December, 1930): 1.

the *Colliery Guardian*, 1930 was “another of those black pages in the history of the British coal mining industry.”¹⁵¹

The Admiralty’s decision to use oil instead of coal was a major contributor to the economic and industrial problems of South Wales. The Navy purchased 1.73 million tons less coal in 1930 than it had in 1919, a decrease of 96 percent.¹⁵² Some estimated that the loss of naval contracts reduced the gross income of miners in South Wales by £2.2 million a year.¹⁵³ At the same time, Britain’s use of oil was rising steadily. The country’s imports of oil grew by over 500 percent between 1913 and 1931, much of it for use in the Navy. The nearly 500 million gallons of oil that entered into Britain in 1931 were estimated to cost £40 million, money that Finlay Gibson, the secretary of the largest organization of colliery owners in South Wales, believed to be “enriching the foreigner.”¹⁵⁴

Indeed, anxiety about the future was already deeply rooted in South Wales by the spring of 1931 when Bernard Acworth visited Cardiff.¹⁵⁵ There was little to be optimistic about. Three months earlier the editors of the *Colliery Guardian* had written: “if we emerge from the imbroglio intact, it will only be through luck or the proverbial national capacity for improvisation.”¹⁵⁶ Acworth had delivered his address in a way that seized upon Welsh concerns about the future. He diagnosed the region’s problems, identifying

¹⁵¹ “The Coal Trade in 1930,” *Colliery Guardian* (2 January 1931): 45.

¹⁵² “The Navy & Welsh Coal,” *Western Mail*, 24 July 1931, 7.

¹⁵³ “The Coal v. Oil Fight,” *Western Mail*, 15 July 1931, 12; “£2,219,000 A Year Lost to Welsh Miners. How the Oil Policy Affects Wages,” *Western Mail*, 23 April 1931, 15.

¹⁵⁴ “The Fuel Problem,” *Western Mail*, 17 July 1931, 11. Gibson was secretary of the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coal Owners Association from 1915 to 1945. See Durham Mining Museum, “Finlay A. Gibson,” available at: <http://www.dmm.org.uk/whoswho/g003.htm>.

¹⁵⁵ Concerns about the future of South Wales were also apparent in the writings of G.C. Dew, Welsh member of the Institute of Fuel, and J.M. Kenworthy, Labour MP for Central Hull. See G.C. Dew, “Fuel for the Navy: Oil from British Coal,” *The Times*, 27 March 1931, 8; J.M. Kenworthy, “Fuel for the Navy,” *The Times*, 28 March 1931, 8.

¹⁵⁶ “The Coal Trade in 1930,” *Colliery Guardian* (2 January 1931): 47.

its high unemployment and economic stagnation as the symptoms of an oil affliction. Acworth's prescription for a return to coal was popular with the local media and his anti-oil campaign quickly received the backing of several local newspapers. The *Western Mail* believed that the British coal industry in general was "engaged in a desperate fight for life," and welcomed Acworth's effort to stimulate pro-coal sentiments.¹⁵⁷ The adoption of oil in the Royal Navy was "a grave national blunder" that had left the British mining industry in a state of "pathetic disaster," the paper wrote.¹⁵⁸ To the *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, Acworth's proposal to return to coal in the Navy was "reasoned" and worthy of further consideration.¹⁵⁹ The *Colliery Guardian* also welcomed Acworth's efforts on behalf of the coal industry in the spring of 1931: "now, when the last coal-burning capital ship is on the point of going to the shipbreakers, a strong movement on behalf of coal has been started. And, curiously enough the mainspring has come from the Navy itself."¹⁶⁰

In the week after Acworth's address, South Wales was buzzing with discussion on the oil-fuel controversy. The Cardiff Business Club, responding to the general enthusiasm that had emerged on the subject, announced it would create an organization that would consolidate the pro-coal voices of concern and focus their efforts to campaign against the use of oil in the Navy. In the first week of April a host of local industrial and political interests met at the Club and formed the Back to Coal Movement, which was the first of its kind in Britain to unite in opposition to the use of oil.¹⁶¹ In the following weeks the Back to Coal Movement endeavoured to increase support for its campaign throughout

¹⁵⁷ "Welsh Coal for the Navy. An Industry's Fight for Life," *Western Mail*, 1 April 1931, 6.

¹⁵⁸ "Welsh Coal for the Navy. An Industry's Fight for Life," *Western Mail*, 1 April 1931, 6.

¹⁵⁹ "Back to Coal," *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 4 April 1931, 3.

¹⁶⁰ "Admiralty Coal," *Colliery Guardian* (10 April 1931): 1292-1293.

¹⁶¹ "The Admiralty and Welsh Coal," *Western Mail*, 4 April 1931, 8.

South Wales, bringing the fuel debate to local town halls, business clubs, and church luncheons.¹⁶² The movement's initial efforts to publicize the fuel issue were highly successful in enlisting the support of a host of powerful leaders of industry, commerce, and municipal government.¹⁶³

With the patronage of South Wales's politico-industrial communities secured, and with the encouragement of the local press, the Back to Coal Movement sought to increase its presence in the national fuel debate. On 15 April the Lord Mayor of Cardiff, R.G. Hill-Snook, called for a conference of interested parties to meet at Cardiff City Hall to determine the future of the organization.¹⁶⁴ The *Western Mail* welcomed the conference, and commented that it would be "certainly one of the most interesting gatherings of municipal, commercial and industrial leaders ever held in Cardiff."¹⁶⁵ To Mayor Hill-Snook, the Back to Coal Movement's inaugural meeting was to be much more than a congregation of elite men in the Welsh capital. The work of the Back to Coal Movement would have implications for the entire region, he imagined, and its foundational assembly would be "one of the most important gatherings in the history of the South Wales and Monmouthshire coalfields."¹⁶⁶

On the night of 25 April, 1931, the Back to Coal Movement and nearly 400 of its supporters from Wales's commercial and industrial communities and representatives of

¹⁶² "Coal Best for the Navy. Tour Suggested to Capt. Acworth," *Western Mail*, 6 April 1931, 6.

¹⁶³ Including Sir David Llewellyn; Sir J.W. Benyon, manager of Welsh Steel Corp.; D.R. Phillips, President of the Cardiff Chamber of Commerce; J.E. Emlyn-Jones, Chairman of the Cardiff and Bristol Shipowners' Association; W.D. Wight, Chairman of the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coalowners' Association; R.G. Hill-Snook, Lord Mayor of Cardiff; the municipal councils of Aberdare, Newport, Glamorgan, and Swansea; the South Wales Miners' Federation; the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coalowners' Association and the Institute of Naval Architects. "Captain Acworth Replies," *Western Mail*, 7 April 1931, 8; "Oil from Coal," *Western Mail*, 17 April 1931, 8; "Cardiff Ships Use Coal. Accountants Welcome the Campaign," *Western Mail*, 18 April 1931, 8; "Back to Coal," *Western Mail*, 20 April 1931, 6; "Notes from the Coal Fields," *Colliery Guardian* (24 April 1931): 1481.

¹⁶⁴ "Claims of Coal. Cogent Arguments Unanswered," *Western Mail*, 15 April 1931, 7.

¹⁶⁵ "Back to Coal," *Western Mail*, 20 April 1931, 6.

¹⁶⁶ "Petrol from Coal," *Western Mail*, 14 April 1931, 8.

over 30 local municipalities met at Cardiff City Hall.¹⁶⁷ The decision to meet at City Hall, as opposed to the Cardiff Business Club, is evidence that the naval fuel debate had become a fundamental issue in South Wales, moving from a private place of business and commerce to a public place of broader, more inclusive, civic importance. Acworth was asked to deliver the opening address, in which he repeated a paraphrased version of his anti-oil platform. He stressed that oil had been a forced technological development that had resulted in industrial decay and social insecurity, and that a return to coal was the nation's only recourse.¹⁶⁸ When Acworth finished, Mayor Hill-Snook formed an executive committee of the Back to Coal Movement, which was intended to provide further leadership for the growing anti-oil crusade in South Wales.¹⁶⁹ Taking the Chair, Hill-Snook appointed a diverse cross-section of Welsh civic figures to the committee, including the president of the Cardiff Business Club, the mayors of five local municipalities, the presidents of a dozen regional chambers of commerce, chairmen of several major coal owners' associations, a naval officer, Welsh members of parliament, and a fuel scientist. Importantly, the organization had succeeded in acquiring the support of the South Wales Miners' Federation, a powerful and influential component of the mining industry, whose president was also given a position on the executive.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ "Notes from the Coal Fields," *Colliery Guardian* (1 May 1931): 1569.

¹⁶⁸ "Preserving the Welsh Coal Industry," *Western Mail*, 25 April 1931, 8.

¹⁶⁹ It is not clear how the committee was selected.

¹⁷⁰ The full executive was comprised of the following members: the Lord Mayor of Cardiff; the Mayors of Newport, Swansea, Llanelli, Neath, and Merthyr; the Chairmen of the Glamorgan, Monmouthshire, and Carmarthenshire County Councils; the Presidents of the Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, Port Talbot, and Llanelli Chambers of Commerce; the Chairmen of the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coalowners' Association, the Coal Exporters' Association, the Shipbrokers' Association, and the Shipowners' Association; the Newport Harbour Commissioner; the President of the Cardiff Business Club; President of the Coaltrimmers' Union; the President of the South Wales Miners' Federation; Lieutenant-Colonel D. Watts-Morgan, MP and D. Morgan Rees. "'Back to Coal' Demand: Appeal from Wales to Admiralty," *Western Mail*, 25 April 1931, 9.

Mayor Hill-Snook christened the Back to Coal Movement with a manifesto that established the organization's mission statement:

That this conference, representative of the whole of the public authorities, business, commercial, and professional, of the area of the South Wales coalfield and the ports and towns adjacent thereto largely dependent thereon, view with alarm the possibilities of danger which have been indicated by a continuation of the policy of being dependent upon a foreign commodity or a commodity to be carried from overseas for the keeping of his Majesty's fleet in commission.

This conference also views with concern the continued depression in trade, and particularly in the mining industry, bringing with it serious unemployment, and considers that no efforts should be spared in ensuring that everything possible should be done in endeavouring to bring prosperity back to the coalfield, and this conference, with these points in mind, hereby appoints a committee consisting of the undermentioned gentlemen with power to co-opt and increase their number, such committee to select and appoint a delegation to wait upon the Admiralty and place before them the view of this conference, namely, that the Admiralty should give the most serious consideration to the necessity of reverting to the use of coal."¹⁷¹

The driving element of the Back to Coal manifesto was clearly a fear of a potential future danger. The threat of the Royal Navy being cut off from its fuel supplies was the movement's primary concern, followed, though no less significantly, by the negative social and commercial consequences of using oil. The narrative that emerges from the manifesto follows the geopolitical storyline that Acworth had outlined in his address in April. Britain was a major power in the international system, but segregation from its fuel source weakened the nation and left it vulnerable at home and abroad. The desire for safety and security in Britain's military, commercial, and diplomatic activities permeates the manifesto, and it is clear that the Back to Coal Movement adopted many of the anxieties about the future that Acworth had enunciated. Chairman Hill-Snook concluded the Back to Coal Movement's inaugural meeting with a statement that points to the organization's protectionist agenda: "It is only reasonable that the British Navy should be

¹⁷¹ "'Back to Coal' Demand: Appeal From Wales to Admiralty. Unique Conference," *Western Mail*, 25 April 1931, 9.

run on a British product, owned by British capital, mined by British miners, and transported by British labour.”¹⁷²

The Back to Coal Movement had established two primary goals in its manifesto: to increase the organization’s ranks and to compel the Admiralty to return to the use of coal. Throughout the spring and summer of 1931, the Back to Coal Movement strove to fulfil its first mission, publicizing its arguments against oil in a variety of media outlets in South Wales. Once again, the Back to Coal Movement’s message of a return to the prosperity and security of coal was well received in Wales, but it also began to garner support from centres outside of the coalmining region. Endorsements for the anti-oil campaign came from the Navy League, Lloyd’s Register of Shipping, and distinguished Admiral of the First World War, Lord John Jellicoe, in the early summer of 1931.¹⁷³ Though many proponents of the movement were skeptical of the potential for an actual return to coal in the Navy, they were nonetheless enthusiastic about the revival of excitement and hope in one of the nation’s most depressed areas. As Professor George Knox, a well-known fuel scientist commented: “any action is preferable to sitting with folded arms passively watching the strangulation of a great industry, coupled with the menace to the Navy through its dependence on foreign supplies of fuel.”¹⁷⁴

The Back to Coal Movement engaged members of Parliament, as well, adding a new political dimension to the South Wales fuel campaign. The movement strove, in particular, for the support of Welsh MPs, and to do so it circulated a single-page leaflet

¹⁷² “‘Back to Coal’ Demand: Appeal From Wales to Admiralty. Unique Conference,” *Western Mail*, 25 April 1931, 9.

¹⁷³ “Navy League Says ‘Use Both Fuels,’” *Western Mail*, 6 May 1931, 7. Admiral Sir J. R. Jellicoe (ret.) drew upon his First World War experience to warn of the dangers of dependency on a foreign fuel, an “aching anxiety” echoed by other senior veteran admirals such as H. Garwood (ret.) and D.R.L. Nicholson (ret.). See “Coal for the Navy. Engr. Rear-Admiral as Advocate,” *Western Mail*, 1 June 1931, 13; and “Coal for the Navy. Admiral Nicholson on Oil and War,” *Western Mail*, 18 June 1931, 14.

¹⁷⁴ “Notes from the Coal Fields,” *Colliery Guardian* (15 May 1931): 1739.

that summarized their concerns and ambitions, entitled “The British Fuel Campaign.”¹⁷⁵

The leaflet began by stating that “the object of the British Fuel Campaign is to free the Nation from the stranglehold of foreign oil by the restoration of Coal as the basis of transport and industry and as the motive power of national defence,” stressing the movement’s core themes of foreignness, insecurity, and fear.¹⁷⁶ Unlike the Back to Coal manifesto, this document focussed primarily on the social and industrial consequences of oil, and argued that the use of foreign fuel threatened Britain’s ability to survive in the future. “From aspects apart from those of military defence, the position is equally grave. Nearly nine million tons of British Merchant shipping are now dependent upon oil, a fact which renders still more precarious the supplies of Sea Borne Food and raw materials on which we depend for our existence.”¹⁷⁷ Oil had provided the Navy with faster ships, the leaflet admitted, but its use had weakened Britain, transferring the nation’s security to foreigners while at the same time diminishing the strength of its staple industry and the vitality of its society. The document also provided concrete socio-economic evidence for the MPs to consider: 350 000 miners and their families were being supported by the state as a result of the use of oil. The leaflet continued the Back to Coal Movement’s practice of presenting a narrative of the past and the present, and it provided two projections for the future of the nation: one that was dangerous and stagnant with oil, and one that was secure and prosperous with coal. “This state of affairs cannot continue if the United Kingdom is to survive as a great industrial and commercial nation,” the leaflet concluded.

¹⁷⁵ The Back to Coal Movement, “The British Fuel Campaign,” leaflet, (London: Argus Press, [Summer, 1931]): 1-2.

¹⁷⁶ The Back to Coal Movement, “The British Fuel Campaign,” 1.

¹⁷⁷ The Back to Coal Movement, “The British Fuel Campaign,” 1. Capitals in the original.

“Only Government free of industrial entanglement and commitments is Government free to uphold justice between Industry and Industry, and between Man and Man.”¹⁷⁸

By the mid-summer of 1931, the Back to Coal Movement was prepared to pursue its secondary goal of approaching the Admiralty with its concerns about oil. The *Western Mail* continued to be an ardent supporter of the pro-coal campaign, publishing a number of provocative articles on the fuel issue that advanced the movement and its pro-coal policy proposals. In June the *Western Mail* wrote that the fuel issue was a case study in a larger struggle between national and international economies, and that it was a “matter of imperative need that we should reduce our dependence on imported fuel in favour of fuel which is ready to hand in our own country.”¹⁷⁹ The paper stressed to its popular readership that a return to coal would address South Wales’s general economic difficulties and would return prosperity to the region’s industries, as “the money now sent out to foreign oil fields would go to our own people.”¹⁸⁰ At the end of June the Back to Coal Movement successfully requested a meeting with the Admiralty in London, which was set for 1 July, 1931. Iestyn Williams, secretary of the Back to Coal Movement and its public relations manager, was enthusiastic about the potential for success at the Admiralty, believing that the deputation of pro-coal lobbyists would be “unquestionably one of the most influential and representative which has ever appeared before any Government department.”¹⁸¹

The 1 July issue of the *Western Mail* was filled with articles, editorials, illustrations, and images detailing the Back to Coal Movement’s platform. The movement

¹⁷⁸ The Back to Coal Movement, “The British Fuel Campaign,” 2.

¹⁷⁹ “Back to Coal,” *Western Mail*, 24 June 1931, 6.

¹⁸⁰ “Coal for the Navy,” *Western Mail*, 30 June 1931, 8.

¹⁸¹ “Back to Coal Movement,” *Western Mail*, 29 June 1931, 13.

was doing difficult work on behalf of the nation, the paper argued, claiming that “no reproach of selfishness attaches to the deputation. South Wales is one of the most important economic areas in the country and its welfare is therefore a national as well as local concern.”¹⁸² The Back to Coal Movement was preparing to fight an insidious invader; constructing a metaphor of a kingly struggle for supremacy and sovereignty, the paper wished the Back to Coal Movement luck in London, and championed it as a crusade against the forces that had “ousted British coal and crowned foreign oil.”¹⁸³

Leaving behind the support and encouragement of South Wales, the 22 delegates of the Back to Coal Movement, the “chief civic and business representatives of South Wales,” met with the parliamentary secretary of the Admiralty, Charles Ammon, in London.¹⁸⁴ The deputation wasted no time in stating their intent: “Our object in presenting this petition is to obtain an assurance that the Royal Navy will revert, at the earliest possible date, to the utilization of British coal as fuel.”¹⁸⁵ The Back to Coal executives expressed their concerns about the availability of a consistent and safe supply of oil, and the ability to operate the naval defences of the nation in a future war. The Admiralty was ensnared in a dependency upon foreigners, the deputation argued, and only by returning to Britain’s natural and domestic fuel would the nation be guaranteed its safety in the future. The economic and political consequences of using oil were also raised, including high unemployment, increased social security expenses, industrial

¹⁸² *Western Mail*, 1 July 1931, 8.

¹⁸³ *Western Mail*, 1 July 1931, 10.

¹⁸⁴ “Rebuff for Welsh Coal. Admiralty Evasive Reply to Deputation,” *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 4 July 1931, 7. The delegates had requested to meet with the First Lord of the Admiralty, A.V. Alexander, but en route to London they were informed that he was unavailable. Ammon, Alexander’s parliamentary secretary, was no friend of the Back to Coal Movement and had dismissed their fuel-related enquiries in the House of Commons. See for example, “Written Answers,” 22 April 1931, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 251, col. 957; “Oil Fuel,” 23 April 1931, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th ser., vol. 251, col. 1155.

¹⁸⁵ “Coal v. Oil Fight by South Wales,” *Western Mail*, 2 July 1931, 9.

decline and social instability. “In short,” the deputation concluded, “we claim that the State, in unnecessarily utilising a foreign fuel for the Royal Navy, is in effect maintaining in employment workmen in foreign countries, while at the same time paying unemployment benefits to idle, and therefore discouraged, British workmen.”¹⁸⁶ The deputation’s storyline was that Britain was in a state of depression, struggling to prosper in a competitive world. The movement also expected a future war, and wished to see Britain independent and in a position of strength in anticipation of such a conflict. As international economies retracted and austerity measures were instituted, the Back to Coal Movement viewed Britain as vulnerable and isolated in an increasingly dangerous world.

When the deputation finished its presentation, Ammon retrieved from his briefcase copies of a type-written response that had been prepared in advance, passed them around to the delegates, and began to read aloud. He stated that “thorough trial” had illustrated the operational and technical superiority of oil over coal, and had proven “most definitely the advantages of oil-fuel.”¹⁸⁷ In regards to the issues of supply, independence, and national security, Ammon appeared to agree with the Back to Coal Movement’s concerns. Where they differed was on the probability of a future conflict, and the Navy’s need for speed and endurance, rather than economy and security, when considering its choice of fuel. “Although the dependence of the Navy on foreign supplies of fuel is recognized to be a serious disability and the Admiralty would much prefer to be able to

¹⁸⁶ “Coal v. Oil Fight by South Wales,” *Western Mail*, 2 July 1931, 9. Over 83 000 colliery workers were unemployed in the summer of 1931, 52 000 of them wholly. “Notes from the Coal Fields,” *Colliery Guardian* (17 July 1931): 227.

¹⁸⁷ These included easier handling, better efficiency, and more speed. Interestingly, the record for the trans-Atlantic journey was at the time held by a coal-burning ship, the *Mauretania*. “Coal v. Oil Fight by South Wales,” *Western Mail*, 2 July 1931, 9.

use fuel of home production,” Ammon admitted, “the military advantages of using oil are considered greatly to outweigh the disadvantages.”¹⁸⁸ When a member of the deputation asked what the Admiralty’s plan was *if* the supply of oil was to be disrupted in peace or war, Ammon responded with vague optimism – “The advisers and those responsible for the administration and control of the British Navy are perfectly content and satisfied that they will be able to deal with the position if and when it should arise.”¹⁸⁹ Ammon thanked the delegation and adjourned the meeting. The Back to Coal Movement, and the case for coal, had been summarily dismissed.

The exchange between the Back to Coal deputation and the Admiralty is an interesting intersection of popular, formal, and practical geopolitical conceptions. The two bodies had irreconcilable imaginations of the world system, and two very different visions of the future. The pro-coal lobby viewed the security threats associated with oil as insurmountable, deeply rooted, and, most importantly, imminent. The Admiralty did not share the same sense of urgency, and was, instead, perfectly content that if and when the supply of the nation’s military fuel was to be cut off unexpectedly, the situation would somehow be resolved. To the Back to Coal Movement, Britain’s future, if it continued to use oil, would be characterised by disaster. To the Admiralty, the future was far less bleak and certainly not as path dependent as the Back to Coal Movement imagined.

The reaction in South Wales to the Admiralty’s dismissal of the pro-coal deputation was fierce. Acworth was uncompromising in his assessment: “The country now knows definitely that those responsible for the administration of the Navy and for

¹⁸⁸ “Coal v. Oil Fight by South Wales,” *Western Mail*, 2 July 1931, 9.

¹⁸⁹ “The Coal v. Oil Fight,” *Western Mail*, 15 July 1931, 12.

the safety of the country intend to rely indefinitely on the goodwill of the foreigner.”¹⁹⁰ The *Western Mail* shared Acworth’s consternation, and believed that the Admiralty’s response represented a hostile declaration of “antagonism to British fuel in any shape.”¹⁹¹ The *Colliery Guardian* was also irritated, but remained optimistic. “Although the reply of the Admiralty was unfavourable in the extreme,” its editors wrote, “the question of a reversion to coal in place of oil in the Navy is not in South Wales being allowed to rest.”¹⁹² Others in the region were less hopeful for the future success of the pro-coal lobby. One editorial in the *Western Mail* commented: “When the history of this controversy has to be told, it will be writ large that Britain was used for certain purposes at her tremendous risk.”¹⁹³

Though the Back to Coal Movement had failed to achieve its goal of pushing the Admiralty toward a pro-coal policy, it emerged from the defeat unified and defiant. “If the Admiralty think they have ‘killed’ the agitation,” the *Western Mail* wrote, “they have made a mistake.”¹⁹⁴ The Back to Coal Movement was, however, at a crossroads, and its future was uncertain. Suggestions for a new course of action came from many quarters, and included more research for oil from coal, a focus on the Merchant Marine, and further consultation with fuel experts.¹⁹⁵ The most frequently made proposal was to have the Admiralty construct a test battleship that would burn coal, which could be compared with its oil-fueled counterparts. To the *Colliery Guardian*, the time for hypothesizing on the future was past, and it was deemed necessary to begin practical demonstrations that

¹⁹⁰ “The Coal v. Oil Fight,” *Western Mail*, 4 July 1931, 11. See also Sir E.J.W. Slade, “Oil Supplies in War,” *RUSI Journal* 71 (November 1926): 119-142.

¹⁹¹ “Coal v. Oil Fight,” *Western Mail*, 8 July 1931, 11.

¹⁹² “Notes from the Coal Fields,” *Colliery Guardian* (10 July 1931): 139.

¹⁹³ “Coal v. Oil Fight,” *Western Mail*, 3 July 1931, 11.

¹⁹⁴ “Coal v. Oil Fight,” *Western Mail*, 3 July 1931, 11.

¹⁹⁵ “Coal Versus Oil,” *Western Mail*, 7 July 1931, 12.

would illustrate conclusively the merits of coal.¹⁹⁶ Acworth, tired of years of campaigning with little result, recommended that the Admiralty be left alone in the future and suggested that the “best way was not to press too hard for any immediate action, but to go on quietly expounding the scheme and its good points to convince the nation that it was in its own interests that coal should be adopted.”¹⁹⁷

The events of the summer and autumn of 1931 encouraged the Back to Coal Movement to press forward with its anti-oil campaign. The effects of the collapse of the international financial system continued to batter Britain’s economy, eventually leading the nation to go off the gold standard. The disarmament conferences that had taken place in Geneva during the summer were unproductive, and stimulated fears that a future global conflict was approaching rapidly. Against this backdrop of instability and international anxiety, Ramsay MacDonald’s Labour Government fell in October, and an emergency coalition government was formed to deal with the crisis. To Acworth, the international and domestic chaos was the fulfillment of the predictions he had made in his writings of the late 1920s. Britain had reached the culmination of its experiment with technology and ‘progress,’ he wrote in September 1931, and it was time for reckoning:

Since the war the nation, like individuals, has been intoxicated with the carefully-fostered battle-cry of ‘Progress,’ within sound of which any man who raised his voice on behalf of tradition, or who ventured to maintain that economics are as simple as they are changeless, has been branded as a Noah and dismissed as reactionary. Well, we have had twelve years of progress, and we have progressed to the very brink of a yawning precipice.¹⁹⁸

Acworth was not alone in calling for a reconsideration of what was considered progressive. Sir Alfred Ewing, President of the Engineering section of the British

¹⁹⁶ “Notes from the Coal Fields,” *Colliery Guardian* (10 July 1931): 139.

¹⁹⁷ “Notes from the Coal Fields,” *Colliery Guardian* (31 July 1931): 397.

¹⁹⁸ “Back to Coal Standard. Nation’s Great Opportunity,” *Western Mail*, 22 September 1931, 15.

Association, warned his peers at their annual luncheon that technological advancement did not necessarily result in social and economic advancement. Referring to the build-up of international armaments, and Japan's invasion of China, he stated that "the world has learned through a sharp lesson that the gifts of the engineer are good gifts only if they are wisely used."¹⁹⁹

While the Back to Coal Movement now had substantial evidence that its warnings of the future were compelling, it chose to engage primarily with a domestic audience in the fall of 1932. National Mark Week in Britain, from October 5-15, 1931, was a commercial campaign that sought to promote the domestic purchase of British-made goods in an effort to counteract the economic consequences of going off the gold standard. The campaign fit well into the Back to Coal Movement's nationalist pro-coal platform, and was fortuitously timed with the organization's transition away from policymaking audiences. The *Colliery Guardian* realized the opportunity that National Mark Week presented for the Back to Coal Movement, and wrote that "instead of belabouring dead horses by asking our Admiralty to revert to the use of raw coal," its efforts should be directed towards illustrating to the public the benefits of the domestic fuel.²⁰⁰ It even went so far as to state that "success in this direction can be more readily achieved by co-operating with the oil companies instead of fighting with them."²⁰¹ To Acworth, National Mark Week was a perfect opportunity to expound the merits of coal,

¹⁹⁹ "Back to the Coal Standard," *Western Mail*, 26 September 1931, 8. Sir Alfred Ewing was a prominent engineer, scientist, and Cambridge professor. E.I. Carlyle, "Ewing, Sir (James) Alfred (1855–1935)," rev. W. H. Brock, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/33058>, (accessed July 29, 2012).

²⁰⁰ "Fuel and Power," *Colliery Guardian* (3 October 1931): 1142.

²⁰¹ "Fuel and Power," *Colliery Guardian* (3 October 1931): 1142.

while at the same time draw attention to the Admiralty's foreign oil fuel policy. In a contribution to the *Western Mail* in October 1931, Acworth wrote:

We are killing our chief source of natural wealth and deliberately creating an enormous import industry while throttling our chief export trade. All this we are doing because a ton of oil, at three times the cost, will convey a ship two-ninths greater distance than will a ton of coal. . . . Surely it is better to have a prosperous nation to feed and defend with slightly slower ships than a country bankrupt, ruined, and hopeless with 'ocean grey-hounds.'²⁰²

Though a dark year in Britain's history, 1931 had been a highly successful one for the national anti-oil campaign. Debate on the fuel issue had expanded more rapidly and into more parts of the country than it had in the previous five years, and the nation's most important coal-producing region had become the headquarters of a sustained campaign against the use of oil. For the Back to Coal Movement, it was a challenging inaugural year. The movement had fulfilled its primary mission of expanding its ranks, but it had failed to make any inroads with the Admiralty. This failure had been mitigated by the growing consumer demand for British-made goods, and the election of a new coalition government that was potentially more sympathetic to the coal industry and the Back to Coal Movement's insular economic proposals. In many respects, the movement also benefited from the deterioration of the national economy and the instability of the international system. The Back to Coal Movement's platform, which promised domestic prosperity and security, became increasingly compelling in a period of extreme depression and global anxiety. Feelings were mixed on the Back to Coal Movement's first year. David Davies of Ocean Coal wrote in his annual Christmas message to his miners that the year had been a "grievous disappointment," characterized by defeat and

²⁰² "Fuel & Fighting Forces. Back-To-Coal Appeal," *Western Mail*, 9 October 1931, 5.

decline.²⁰³ To the *Colliery Guardian*, the year had not been as bleak for the coal industry as 1930, but it was concerned that the pro-coal campaign would lose its public visibility amongst a growing list of domestic and international issues: “In the year that is now closing the mining industry was not so much of a cynosure as in those preceding it, for there has been such a piling up of troubles in all directions that to the man in the street the coal fields have not looked quite so black as they did.”²⁰⁴

The Back to Coal Movement wasted no time in re-energizing its campaign in 1932. After several meetings in Cardiff in January, the movement decided to lobby officialdom one final time.²⁰⁵ Hoping that the new National Government of Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin would be inclined to consider the possibility of a national return to coal, on 15 February 1932 the Back to Coal Movement requested a meeting with Prime Minister MacDonald at Whitehall.²⁰⁶ While the Movement waited for a response, the rhetoric of the pro-coal campaign grew increasingly divisive and aggressive. The driving theme of the fuel debate during this period shifted away from a fear of the future and toward a concern that it was in Britain that coal and oil’s life or death conflict was being decided.²⁰⁷

The dangers of the future were, in fact, far less distant than the Back to Coal Movement had initially conceived them to be and in the spring of 1932 the rhetoric of the fuel debate in Britain became noticeably more anxious. On 18 March the president of the Institute of Naval Architects, J. Johnson, gave tacit support to the Back to Coal Movement when he stated that “fuel is the pivot upon which industrial activity turns, and

²⁰³ David Davies, “Our Chairman’s Xmas Message,” *Ocean and National* 4, no. 12 (December 1931): 383.

²⁰⁴ “The Coal Trade in 1931,” *Colliery Guardian* (1 January 1932): 24.

²⁰⁵ “Back to Coal Movement,” *Western Mail*, 16 January 1932, 12.

²⁰⁶ “The Navy’s Fuel. ‘Back to Coal’ Memorial to the Cabinet,” *Western Mail*, 15 February 1932, 12.

²⁰⁷ “Merchant Ships and Fuel,” *Western Mail*, 18 March 1932, 5.

national security and prosperity are the standards by which choice of fuel may be judged.”²⁰⁸ Coal could match oil’s technical and operational qualities, Johnson argued, but the time for marketing the competitiveness of Britain’s domestic fuel was quickly running out. To the *Colliery Guardian*, Britain was not faced with questions of coal *and* oil, but rather, of coal *versus* oil. “From the standpoint of the coal trade, oil competition has been an offensive weapon with a double edge,” its editors wrote. “It has reduced the demand for solid fuels in almost every country and for almost every purpose, and it has thrown a surplus output of coal into the international maelstrom.”²⁰⁹ The *Western Mail* viewed the fuel controversy in similarly aggressive and warning ways, headlining its articles with militaristic phrases such as “Coal’s Battle Against Oil Fuel,” and “Oil’s March on Coal.”²¹⁰ The paper’s readership reflected this violent rhetoric in editorials and opinion pieces, imagining itself as part of a ‘Welsh Phalanx,’ or a ‘coal battalion.’²¹¹ One submission demanded that it was “time to fight” for coal. Drawing on a metaphor of invasion, the author wrote that he ventured “to make this call to arms of every man in South Wales. Protect your homes and your families from this insidious oil aggression, which . . . portends the eventual downfall of Great Britain.”²¹²

Against this backdrop of competition and conflict between coal and oil, the Back to Coal Movement increased its efforts to promote the use of coal in the domestic sphere. The success of National Mark Week had encouraged a sustained effort for the promotion of British goods, which was called the Buy British Campaign. The Back to Coal

²⁰⁸ “Fuel for Merchant Ships,” *Colliery Guardian* (24 March 1932): 588.

²⁰⁹ “Coal and Oil,” *Colliery Guardian* (18 March 1932): 557.

²¹⁰ “Oil’s March on Coal,” *Western Mail*, 16 March 1932, 12; “Coal’s Battle Against Oil Fuel,” *Western Mail*, 23 March 1932, 12.

²¹¹ “Coal v. Oil,” *Western Mail*, 18 February 1932, 12; “Coal Better than Oil,” *Western Mail*, 31 March 1932, 7.

²¹² “Coal’s Battle Against Oil Fuel,” *Western Mail*, 23 March 1932, 12.

Movement integrated its campaign into this national consumer movement, and developed its own clever slogan, “Burn British.”²¹³ The Duke and Duchess of York became interested in the promotion and the Back to Coal Movement leapt at the opportunity to garner such publicity for the pro-coal platform. The royals were invited to South Wales and were taken on a tour of the region’s coal industry, with much public fanfare.²¹⁴ In April, Finlay Gibson, a Back to Coal executive, took to the pages of the *Ocean and National* to expound the virtues of British coal and to promote the Burn British campaign. Gibson narrated the history of oil’s incursions into British everyday life, and stated that the only way to ensure the future of the British coal industry was for the average consumer to insist on using only coal for their domestic energy needs.²¹⁵

In early April, Prime Minister MacDonald agreed to meet with the Back to Coal deputation, and on the 21st the movement returned to London with a petition requesting the National Government to reconsider the naval fuel issue and Britain’s energy security dilemma. The *Western Mail*, excited by the movement’s opportunity to meet with a new body of policymakers, optimistically noted that the deputation was the “most influential ever received at Whitehall.”²¹⁶ On this occasion the Back to Coal Movement had requested to meet with MacDonald, the Prime Minister, but he was in Geneva for disarmament discussions. Nevertheless, the deputation secured a meeting with ex-Prime Minister and Lord President of the Council, Stanley Baldwin, which was perhaps a measure of the improved standing of the Back to Coal Movement. Indeed, in a presentation of facts that lasted several hours, each member of the deputation was able to

²¹³ “‘Burn British’ Coal Campaign,” *Western Mail*, 24 March 1932, 12.

²¹⁴ “Notes from the Coal Fields,” *Colliery Guardian* (18 March 1932): 569.

²¹⁵ Finlay Gibson, “Coal versus Oil,” *Ocean and National* 5, no. 4 (April, 1932): 108.

²¹⁶ “Coal V. Oil: Commission Demanded. South Wales Call to Remove National Menace,” *Western Mail*, 22 April 1932, 9.

address Baldwin with their particular concerns, drawing on their individual expertise in industry, commerce, and politics.²¹⁷ The deputation stressed the economic and social consequences of oil, and touched only briefly on factors of security, illustrating the movement's shifting, domestically-focussed approach to the fuel debate and their understanding of the differing politics of the government in comparison to the Admiralty. Most concerning to the deputation was the national oil policy's effect on the unemployment rate in South Wales, which they argued was resulting in "extreme distress" in the region.²¹⁸ The deputation concluded with a request to establish a commission of inquiry into the fuel issue, noting that it was not seeking any financial or political concessions for South Wales or the British coal industry. Baldwin thanked the deputation for its efforts, and said that "he had never met a more representative or stronger deputation or one which stated its case with more earnestness."²¹⁹ The decision to create a commission of enquiry, however, was up to MacDonald, and Baldwin promised to discuss the issue with the Prime Minister when he returned from Geneva.

From the *Western Mail*'s perspective, the deputation had asked only that the government re-align what it was saying and what it was doing. The paper "failed to see how the general community could be expected to observe, in its fullest sense, that exhortation [to 'Buy British'] at a time when the British Navy itself was not 'buying British,' and when, apparently, no serious efforts were being made by the Admiralty to

²¹⁷ "Coal V. Oil: Commission Demanded. South Wales Call to Remove National Menace," *Western Mail*, 22 April 1932, 9. Notable discussants include Sir David Llewellyn, owner of several Welsh collieries, who outlined the scientific advances made in coal burning technology; J.E. Emlyn-Jones, Liberal politician and shipowner, spoke of the Merchant Marine's successful use of coal; R.T. Evans, Liberal politician and Royal Navy Captain, referenced his experiences in using coal-fueled naval ships in the First World War.

²¹⁸ "'Back to Coal' Appeal," *Colliery Guardian* (22 April 1932): 803.

²¹⁹ "Coal V. Oil: Commission Demanded. South Wales Call to Remove National Menace," *Western Mail*, 22 April 1932, 9.

test the latest and most improved methods of firing boilers with British coal.”²²⁰ The *Ocean and National* shared this sentiment, and hoped that the stigma of hypocrisy would push the government into action. “Possibly the ‘Buy British’ campaign, which is being actively supported in this country, will help to bring home to our Government the isolation of its position in patronizing foreign produced oil to the detriment of the home coal trade.”²²¹

The Back to Coal Movement continued to engage with a popular audience while it waited for the Baldwin-MacDonald response. In June the movement played a major role in the events of Civic Week, a national celebration of *esprit de corps*, and a boon to the pro-coal campaign’s efforts to engage with the local public. At the Cardiff location of the festival, the Back to Coal Movement constructed a steel arched roadway that acted as the entrance to the grounds. This structure was lined with “striking pamphlets relating to coal utilization,” and a continuous audio tape that plied the visitor with reasons for supporting the use of coal:

Coal is Britain’s basic wealth. Coal built Britain’s industrial greatness. For heat, power and light, use British coal. South Wales produces 24 cwt. of coal every second of time, day and night, Sundays, week-days, and holidays included. Do not burn a foreign fuel while 80,000 Welsh miners are seeking employment. Make sure your bread is baked by coal. South Wales produces a coal suitable for every known purpose, and each class and kind the best the world can produce. Be sure your methods of burning coal are up to date. There is no cheaper, cleaner, or more efficient fuel than coal. No smell, no smoke, no danger. Talk coal, think coal, and demand the utilization of coal. The “Back to Coal” movement will advise you what coal to use and how best to use it. The life of Cardiff depends upon the prosperity of the valleys, towns, and villages of South Wales, and they depend on the coal trade. Architects, builders, engineers, hotel proprietors, school-masters, lawyers, shipowners, wherever you have any influence, use it in

²²⁰ “Return to Coal in the Navy. Welsh Deputation to Mr. Baldwin,” *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 23 April 1932, 1.

²²¹ “Editorial Foreword,” *Ocean and National* 5, no. 4 (April, 1932): 107.

favour of burning coal. Institutes, churches, and public buildings, cinemas, theatres, and places of amusement, help your patrons by using coal.²²²

The recording delivered the Back to Coal Movement's message that coal was what made South Wales and, by extension, Britain, great. The moral of the tape was that South Wales would have to help itself return to prosperity. The tape was as informative as it was ideological, and it reassured the consumer that a variety of coals were available that could be used for any household or industrial application. The driving argument of the Back to Coal Movement's Civic Week arch was that it was the individual consumer of coal that could (and should) return South Wales to a state of prosperity, security, and power.

Indeed, the Back to Coal Movement's campaign was progressing well in the summer of 1932. The movement's members felt they had made a good impression on Baldwin, and done much to increase the pro-coal campaign's visibility in South Wales. To the *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, it was a period of "fresh hope" for the coal industry, and one of the few years in recent history that South Wales could feel optimistic about its future.²²³

In mid-July, Baldwin replied to the Back to Coal Movement's request for a commission of inquiry into the fuel issue. In a telegram sent to the Lord Mayor of Cardiff, Baldwin expressed sympathy for the Back to Coal Movement, the coal industry, and South Wales in general, but concluded that no "useful purpose would be served by setting up a Commission of Enquiry."²²⁴ The paramount consideration of the Navy in making its choice of fuel was operational efficiency, Baldwin reported, and though

²²² "Notes from the Coal Fields," *Colliery Guardian* (10 June 1932): 1131.

²²³ "Fresh Hope for Welsh Coal," *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 18 June 1932, 3; "Great News for Coal Trade," *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 2 July 1932, 4.

²²⁴ "Urgency of the 'Back to Coal' Appeal," *Western Mail*, 20 July 1932, 6.

compelling, the issues of price, location, and transportation that the deputation had raised in regards to oil were nevertheless secondary factors.²²⁵ The National Government felt satisfied with the status quo, and was content to continue relying upon the Admiralty to determine the nation's naval fuel policy. Though it disliked Britain's fuel situation, it was a condition that had to be accepted.

Baldwin's decision caused considerable disappointment to the members of the Back to Coal Movement. As *The Times* reported, "it was felt that the reasons advanced for the refusal to set up a commission of inquiry were totally inadequate, and entirely disregarded the unassailable arguments advanced by the Back to Coal Committee."²²⁶ The government's rebuff made it clear to the pro-coal movement that their struggle for South Wales' prosperity and energy security could no longer be continued by applying pressure upwards. The possibility of an effective change in fuel policy through direct lobbying was dead. "Despite this set-back the Back to Coal Movement will fight on," proclaimed the *Western Mail* defiantly, "sustained by the knowledge that it has a large section of the nation behind it."²²⁷ The *Ocean and National* was furious at Baldwin's refusal to investigate the fuel issue, and charged the government with negligence and hypocrisy. It believed that the government's deferral to the Admiralty had undone the nationalist consumer sentiments that the Buy British campaign had fostered, and had created disillusionment amongst British consumers. The magazine framed the event with a metaphor that represented South Wales as a family member pulling more than its weight: "we are reminded of 'force of example,' but we cannot decide which is likely to be the stronger – the various units of the national family struggling to give preference to

²²⁵ "Navy and Use of Coal: Inquiry Refused," *The Times*, 20 July 1932, 14.

²²⁶ "Navy and Use of Coal: Inquiry Refused," *The Times*, 20 July 1932, 14.

²²⁷ "Urgency of the 'Back to Coal' Appeal," *Western Mail*, 20 July 1932, 6.

British products, or the parental administration persisting in its preference for the foreigner.”²²⁸

For the second time in just over a year, the Back to Coal Movement was at a crossroads, and its future course was left uncertain. It enjoyed widespread support in Wales, but had failed to fulfill its mandate of convincing the Admiralty to reconsider coal. At this critical juncture, the movement decided to fully abandon its policymaking ambitions, and turn, instead, to a campaign dedicated to engaging with local, popular audiences.²²⁹ The future of the organization was no longer in London, but in the homes and industries of South Wales.

In July the Back to Coal Movement consulted the Minister of Mines, Isaac Foot, to discuss the organization’s future.²³⁰ Foot suggested to the members that their first task should be to persuade the average consumer to “think of coal and dream of coal.” “When they go to sleep,” Foot imagined, “they ought to have, not a nightmare, but a chunk of coal on their heads.”²³¹ Foot’s conclusion was that oil had won the battle with coal on the seas, but at home, there remained numerous markets where the use of Britain’s domestic fuel could be increased, or where the intrusion of oil could be stemmed, if not reversed. The industry’s difficulty in competing with oil, Foot recognized, was due to a lack of consumer knowledge and an almost non-existent advertising machine. Coal could

²²⁸ “Editorial Foreword,” *Ocean and National* 5, no. 4 (April 1932): 107.

²²⁹ “Welsh Coal Industry’s Fight Against Oil,” *Western Mail*, 5 August 1932, 7; “Fight for Coal,” *Western Mail*, 19 January 1933, 8.

²³⁰ Foot was Liberal MP for Bodmin. In 1931 he supported the National Government and was made Minister of Mines by Ramsay MacDonald. Stanley Goodman, “Foot, Isaac (1880–1960),” rev. Mark Pottle, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2011, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/33189>, (accessed July 29, 2012).

²³¹ “Make the Country Coal Conscious,” *Western Mail*, 27 July 1932, 9.

compete with oil, the Back to Coal Movement and Foot concluded, but the public did not know it.²³²

In mid-summer 1932, the Back to Coal Movement fundamentally restructured its attack on oil. Whereas it had previously argued for a decrease in the use of oil, the movement redoubled its effort to campaign for coal as a competitor with oil. Instead of working *against* oil interests, such as the Admiralty and the government, the Back to Coal Movement began working *with* coal supporters. In July the organization teamed up with the British Mining Association, the Coal Merchants' Federation, the National Council of Coal Traders, and the British Coal Exporters' Federation to create the Coal Utilisation Council, a promotional body that was to act as the pro-coal movement's public relations arm. "This body, we take it, will be frankly propagandist in character, and it is for this reason mainly that we find it worthy of commendation," wrote the *Colliery Guardian*.²³³ The journal welcomed the addition of the Coal Utilisation Council to the pro-coal movement's campaign – "There is, we feel, no longer any reason, in the circumstances, why the leaders of the 'Back-to-Coal' movement should plough a lonely furrow."²³⁴ By the end of the summer the Back to Coal Movement and the Coal Utilisation Council were promoting the use of coal in the furnaces and ovens of Britain's homes, in the engines of its merchant vessels, and even in the cars and busses that plied the nation's streets.²³⁵

²³² "Menace of Imported Oil," *Glasgow Herald*, 26 July 1932, 9; "Make the Country Coal Conscious," *Western Mail*, 27 July 1932, 9.

²³³ "The Nation's Fuel," *Colliery Guardian* (29 July 1932): 209.

²³⁴ "The Nation's Fuel," *Colliery Guardian* (29 July 1932): 210.

²³⁵ See "Welsh Coal Industry's Fight Against Oil," *Western Mail*, 5 August 1932, 7; "The 'Back to Coal' Movement," *Glasgow Herald*, 6 August 1932, 3; "Colloidal Fuel," *Ocean and National* 5, no. 8 (August 1932): 256; Pathé Pictorial, "Coal – Drive!" film (London: British Pathé, 1932); Pathé Pictorial, "Coal Up Your Car!" film (London: British Pathé, 1932).

In the fall of 1932, the popular, domestic approach to the Back to Coal campaign had reached full steam. The editorial board of the *Ocean and National* was pleased that the movement had reconsidered who exactly were stakeholders in the national fuel debate. The government had “political strabismus,” the magazine wrote, and was “scoffing at the gnat to consume the camel.”²³⁶ The *Colliery Guardian* was equally exhausted with the government’s intransigence, writing that “it seems to be a sheer waste of time and money to flog dead donkeys. It is useless to expect that the Admiralty, under this or any other Government, will return to coal.”²³⁷ In October, Acworth offered his thoughts on the pro-coal movement’s new campaign strategy in an address delivered to the Cardiff Publicity Club. “We are up against a devilish big thing,” he stated in reference to the oil industry and its propaganda machine.²³⁸

The members of the pro-coal movement, unified in their determination to continue the campaign for coal, introduced in the fall of 1932 a new publicity strategy that was centred on demonstration. F.E. Webber, president of the Cardiff Business Club, funded a coal exhibition in the city that showed off new types of coal and their uses. Akin to the Civic Week arch, visitors to the exhibition received the message that coal and the coal industry were the basis of Welsh society, and it was up to the consumer to ensure its survival.²³⁹ The Back to Coal Movement’s executive began publishing articles in the *Ocean and National* during this period, as well, in an effort to communicate directly with Welsh miners, the grassroots of the new pro-coal campaign. In October, Iestyn Williams, secretary of the Back to Coal Movement, wrote a position piece that encouraged the

²³⁶ “Editorial Foreword,” *Ocean and National* 5, no. 10 (October, 1932): 325.

²³⁷ “Publicity for Coal,” *Colliery Guardian* (21 October 1932): 767.

²³⁸ “Coal Needs Fair Play. Capt. Acworth and National Safety,” *Western Mail*, 21 October 1932, 10.

²³⁹ “Coal Needs Fair Play. Capt. Acworth and National Safety,” *Western Mail*, 21 October 1932, 10.

average miner to demand that coal be used more extensively in their daily lives. As a consequence of the Admiralty and Government's rejection of the Back to Coal policy, Williams wrote, "the executive of the movement has been practically forced to widen what was the original plan of campaign and to take up the battle on behalf of coal in every possible direction and for every possible purpose where light, heat and power are required in this country."²⁴⁰ Williams encouraged the miners to boycott bread baked by oil-fired furnaces, to take only buses to work that drove on coal, and to use electricity that was generated by coal-fueled power stations. "It will be seen at once," he concluded, "that this market alone is as important at the moment to the Mining industry as the British Navy."²⁴¹ Williams ended his article with a nationalist slogan that echoed the Back to Coal Movement's foundational manifesto: "BUY BRITISH, BURN BRITISH, AND EMPLOY BRITISH LABOUR!"²⁴²

Nineteen thirty-two was a successful year for the Back to Coal Movement. While it had failed in its attempt to negotiate with the National Government, it had continued to increase public support for its campaign and it had penetrated a variety of popular spheres of discussion. It had an organized publicity machine to compete with oil, which had worked hard to increase the pro-coal campaign's national and regional visibility. Its message had been adapted and honed to target a domestic audience, and the results of its new campaign were evident in the public support that it began to receive. Foreign oil remained a threat, to be sure, but as the Back to Coal Movement had come to realise, promoting 'our' fuel was a far more productive endeavour than resisting 'their' fuel.

²⁴⁰ Iestyn Williams, "'Back to Coal' – The Nation's Fuel," *Ocean and National* 5, no. 10 (October, 1932): 327.

²⁴¹ Williams, "'Back to Coal' – The Nation's Fuel," 327. Capitals in the original.

²⁴² Williams, "'Back to Coal' – The Nation's Fuel," 327.

The Back to Coal Movement began 1933 with confidence and momentum as the organization escalated its efforts to re-brand coal as a useful, modern, and patriotic fuel. Iestyn Williams continued to publish in the *Ocean and National*, expounding the benefits of coal for heating, cooking, and transport.²⁴³ Coal was here to stay, Williams ensured his mining audience, and so too were their jobs. Foreign oil was a challenging competitor, he admitted, but at the end of the day, it was only a “school-boy’s craze for novelty.”²⁴⁴ The Back to Coal Movement also pursued a variety of visual publicity campaigns on behalf of coal during this period. Demonstrations and spectacles, such as informational booths at local festivals and innovative travelling exhibitions, remained key components of their strategy to deliver their protectionist, pro-coal message.²⁴⁵ The Navy’s use of oil remained a concern to the movement, but the desire to compel the Admiralty to return to the use of coal disappeared completely from its agenda. South Wales would have to fend for itself. “We must become *coal*-blooded,” wrote the editorial board of the *Ocean and National* in February of 1933, “and endeavour to make everybody else think and talk coal!”²⁴⁶ Iestyn Williams, reflecting on his past two years of campaigning, took comfort in the fact that while the nation’s energy security remained in jeopardy, his organization had succeeded in “enlightening the public mind” to the importance of coal.²⁴⁷

While the Back to Coal Movement failed to achieve a change in policy, it was successful in raising awareness of the dangers of dependency, the threats of foreign

²⁴³ Iestyn Williams, “Coal – The Nation’s Fuel – and Central Heating,” *Ocean and National* 5, no. 11 (November, 1932): 364; Iestyn Williams, “Coal – The Nation’s Fuel – and Ventilation,” *Ocean and National* 6, no. 1 (January, 1933): 6.

²⁴⁴ Williams, “Coal – The Nation’s Fuel – and Ventilation,” 6.

²⁴⁵ See, for example, an image of a “Coal Ordering Office,” which was opened in Cardiff in 1934, in *Colliery Guardian* (14 September 1934): 487. See also an image of a “Coal Advertising Lorry,” which was exhibited at Fulham Fete, London, in *Colliery Guardian* (28 September 1934): 604.

²⁴⁶ ““Back to Coal’ – With Back to the Wall!” *Ocean and National* 6, no. 2 (February, 1933): 42.

²⁴⁷ ““Back to Coal’ – With Back to the Wall!” 42.

influence, and the lure of modernity and ‘progress.’ South Wales was a site of collision between the competing forces of oil and coal, and many viewed the debate over the use of these fuels as a matter of life or death for the region, its industries, and its people. As the Bishop of Llandaff said at the Royal Society’s Trafalgar Day Dinner in October 1933, the Back to Coal Movement had challenged those “foolish optimists who believed in the inevitability of England’s greatness,” and resisted the British coal industry’s most dangerous foreign enemy – that “hated rival, smooth-tongued, suave, gushing, alien and oily.”²⁴⁸ “Progress was not inevitable,” he warned, and “it was only by keeping England pure and sweet at the core that we could maintain its greatness.”²⁴⁹

The Back to Coal Movement’s first three years were characterized by both defeat and success. Acworth’s Cardiff Business Club address had stimulated the rapid growth of anti-oil sentiment in South Wales, and the subsequent effort to promote an alternative pro-coal policy had unified the region in unprecedented ways. The Back to Coal Movement had begun its campaign by attempting to engage directly with the Admiralty’s policymakers, bringing to London their concerns about the ability of Britain’s dominant military institution to perform its mandate of protecting the nation’s security and international trade. Nothing productive had come out of this campaign, and the movement’s leadership realised that its conception of Britain’s energy security paradigm could not be reconciled with that of officials in London. Energy must be reliable, local, and secure, the movement asserted, and Britain’s entanglement in complex and untested international relationships with ‘other’ countries for ‘their’ fuel created unnecessary anxiety for the nation, particularly during the turbulent period of the early 1930s. The

²⁴⁸ “Plea for Use of Welsh Coal,” *Western Mail and Cardiff Times*, 28 October 1933, 2.

²⁴⁹ “Plea for Use of Welsh Coal,” *Western Mail and Cardiff Times*, 28 October 1933, 2.

threats oil posed were not exclusively international, existing somewhere 'out there'.

Neither were they inherently surmountable, as the Admiralty and government believed.

For the Back to Coal Movement oil was an internal, domestic enemy, as well, one that had infiltrated the nation and that portended Britain's industrial and social downfall.

Chapter III

Persisting in Resistance: Official and Popular Responses to the Anti-Oil Movement, 1931-1937

Over the period 1931-1937, Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement's anti-oil publicity and lobbying campaigns publicly challenged the authority and decision making of Britain's naval and political leadership, generating a great deal of popular excitement about the change and, in some circles, fostering a certain paranoia about the consequences of the Admiralty's oil policy. The combination of these social pressures pushed members of the official and naval policymaking community to initiate an aggressive counter-attack on the anti-oil movement. A war of words began in the early 1930s, as each party strove to promote its understanding of the ways in which oil was influencing the country. Where the anti-oil lobby thought of oil as a disruptive and dangerous development, the proponents of oil considered it to be a necessary component of technological progress and improvement.

This chapter will examine how the anti-oil movement was perceived by the South Wales popular media and by officials in political and naval circles. It will investigate the ways in which Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement's anti-oil message was framed and reframed by the proponents of oil and of coal, and which cultural metaphors and national narratives were employed in the process. In particular, this chapter will analyse the themes of 'us' and 'them,' 'ours' and 'theirs,' 'here' and 'there,' and 'the local' and 'the national' that coloured the exchanges between the proponents of coal and oil.

The Royal Navy's transition from domestic coal to foreign oil was a watershed event that not only fundamentally altered Britain's cultural, political, economic, and

industrial ways of life, but which also signalled a dramatic shift in the relationship between Britain and the international community. These changes encouraged what geographer Gertjan Dijkink has termed a ‘geopolitical transition’ in thought, in which an existing set of understandings of the world and how it works are rejected and alternative sets are presented.²⁵⁰ As Dijkink asserts, these shifts in the perceptions of the world generally encourage the formation of movements that attempt to challenge the authority of the existing policymaking institutions, and that strive to re-explain the world in new terms.²⁵¹ The consequent effort of dismantling and redressing, what he calls a “missionary aim,” is most often expressed through popular discourses and in local media.²⁵²

The anti-oil movement was what Dijkink defines as a ‘new social movement,’ or a group or set of actions that pursues the change of certain principles in society, and that attempts to produce new (or restore traditional) “cultural codes for collective and individual behaviour.”²⁵³ This process of enframing, or re-framing, as Dijkink has noted,

[...] immediately invalidates every previous judgement and decision. All thoughts take a turn in a completely different direction, like – to say in the sphere of example – a school of fish that suddenly swings round as if obeying an imperceptible signal.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ Gertjan Dijkink, “Geopolitics Debate IV Geopolitics as Social Movement?” *Geopolitics* 9, no. 2 (2004): 462.

²⁵¹ Dijkink, “Geopolitics Debate,” 464.

²⁵² Dijkink, “Geopolitics Debate,” 462.

²⁵³ Dijkink, “Geopolitics Debate,” 463. A more complex definition of social movements posits that they are “collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority.” David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004): 11.

²⁵⁴ Dijkink, “Geopolitics Debate,” 464.

The anti-oil movement's campaign against oil was an attempt to reframe the relationships between Britain, its resources, and its position in the international community, and to reorient the ways in which the nation thought about and used fuel. It put forward a new conception of national life based upon the use of domestic coal, and presented its policies as viable alternatives to the existing official conceptions of security.

The Back to Coal Movement deputation to the First Lord of the Admiralty, A.V. Alexander, on 1 July 1931 was, for several reasons, a defining moment for the anti-oil campaign. The event marked the first direct engagement between the proponents of coal and oil, and was the first occasion on which the Navy's top civilian executives officially responded to the concerns of the anti-oil movement. In South Wales, the proponents of a return to coal in the Navy placed great importance on the meeting. Coverage in the local media outlets expressed the expectation that Alexander would listen to the anti-oil message, dutifully consider the arguments, and incorporate the Back to Coal proposals into its existing fuel policy. As Admiral Sir D.R.L. Nicholson wrote to the *Western Mail*, "the time is due for this and other naval matters to be dispassionately and impartially examined."²⁵⁵

The First Lord's stonewalling of the Back to Coal Movement deputation caused outrage in South Wales. The local media was unanimous in its condemnation of the official response, which was deemed as being insufficiently appreciative of the serious concerns presented by the anti-oil delegates. The failure of Alexander to attend the

²⁵⁵ "Coal for the Navy. Admiral Nicholson on Oil and War." *Western Mail*, 18 June 1931, 14. See also "Annual Meeting of United National Collieries, Ltd.," *Ocean and National* 4, no. 6 (June 1931): 130. Admiral Sir Douglas Romilly Lothian Nicholson joined the Navy in 1880 and was Vice-Admiral of the Reserve Fleet from 1922-1924. He retired in 1926. See "Obituary. Admiral Sir Douglas Nicholson," *The Times*, 9 February 1946, 7.

meeting and the prepared response that his parliamentary secretary, Charles Ammon, read to the delegates was widely perceived as being an affront to South Wales and the coal industry, and a sign that the Government and the Admiralty believed the anti-oil movement's arguments were unworthy of discussion. Many in the region felt that Ammon had not only dismissed their concerns, but had attacked them as well.²⁵⁶

A primary element of Acworth's campaign against oil was the subversion of government by oil companies, and the ways in which the oil industry was influencing Britain's political system and its policymaking institutions. The Government and the Admiralty's unwillingness to engage in discussion on the dangers of oil, and its unequivocal refusal to consider the merits of coal, fit well into his narrative of foreign subversion. In the summer of 1931, the media in South Wales endeavoured to redefine the enemies of the anti-oil movement. To the *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, the exchange in London was evidence that Acworth's thesis was plausible, if not confirmed. On 4 July, the paper produced a cartoon that reframed the oil issue with new terms of 'us' and 'them,' and 'here' and 'there.'²⁵⁷

The illustration entitled "In the Balance," is centred on a large weighing scale.²⁵⁸ Behind a heap of coal on one side of the scale stand five members of the Back to Coal deputation, their hands extended as if making an argument. Behind a barrel of oil, on the opposite side of the scale, stands a likeness of A.V. Alexander, with the clock tower of Westminster Palace in the distance. Alexander is pictured looking perplexed, with one

²⁵⁶ See for example, "Coal v. Oil Fight by South Wales," *Western Mail*, 2 July 1931, 9; "Coal v. Oil Fight," *Western Mail*, 3 July 1931, 11; "The Coal v. Oil Fight," *Western Mail*, 4 July 1931, 11; "Coal v. Oil Fight," *Western Mail*, 7 July 1931, 12; "Coal v. Oil Fight," *Western Mail*, 8 July 1931, 11.

²⁵⁷ "In the Balance," *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 4 July 1931, 1.

²⁵⁸ See Image B, page 113.

hand in his pocket and the other scratching his head. Placed next to the heap of coal are 'arguments for coal,' represented by packages labelled 'precarious oil supplies' and 'help for coal trade.' Next to the barrel of oil is a small package marked 'arguments for oil,' which sits alone.

The image illustrates the *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*'s view that the pro-coal movement had a variety of compelling arguments to support its claims for a return to coal, which were supported by a diverse group of national and local figures. On the other hand, the Government was illustrated as being confused in its use of foreign oil, without any arguments or evidence to support its policy. The paper's portrayal suggested that government and naval officials were either incompetent or were hiding their reason for using foreign oil. In a more general sense, the cartoon added new dimensions to the popular conception of the fuel debate at the regional and local levels.²⁵⁹ The oil controversy was no longer portrayed as being an abstract conflict between British coal and foreign oil, 'our fuel' and 'their fuel.' It was now framed explicitly as being a contest between 'us' and 'them' – the Back to Coal Movement versus the Admiralty; South Wales versus London; the many versus the few.

In the fall of 1931, several official proponents of oil emerged to defend the Navy's fuel policy and the Government's response to the Back to Coal Movement deputation. On 26 November, J.S.S. Brame, professor of chemistry at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, delivered a lecture to the Royal United Services Institute, entitled

²⁵⁹ Critical geopolitics theory defines 'popular' as the lay understandings of geopolitical issues. In this chapter, popular is used to describe audiences outside the elite, policymaking class. See Jason Dittmer and Klaus Dodds, "Popular Geopolitics Past and Future: Fandom, Identities and Audiences," *Geopolitics* 13, no. 3 (July 2008): 437-457.

“Power Fuel for the Services.”²⁶⁰ Brame fully supported the Admiralty’s use of oil, arguing that the fuel provided the Navy with crucial technical and operational benefits.²⁶¹ His conclusion was that oil had been chosen as the Navy’s fuel for reasons that transcended regional industrial interests and sentiments of patriotism: it superseded coal in all respects. If coal were to ever be used in the future, Brame projected, it would have to be converted into oil.

In the discussion that followed Brame’s lecture, Vice-Admiral Sir R. W. Skelton, the chairman of the meeting and at one time the Royal Navy’s senior engineer, stated his thoughts on the Back to Coal Movement and the anti-oil campaign:

There is a great deal of loose talk about fuel, and great pressure is always being brought to bear on us to use coal, which is a home product, instead of oil. I would like to say how impossible it is to consider any such suggestion of coal for the Navy. We would handicap ourselves exactly to the same extent as if we did away with cordite and went back to black powder. That is not an exaggeration. The disadvantages of coal from a military point of view are insuperable. It would more than halve our endurance; it would more than halve our power.²⁶²

Skelton’s comment was more than a refutation of the anti-oil movement’s concerns – it was an attack intended to be fatal. The powerful Admiral systematically dismantled the operational and technical arguments for the use of coal, challenged the anti-oil movement’s credibility, and humiliated its adherents. Skelton dismissed all concerns about foreign oil as being overly imaginative and excessively pessimistic, and any

²⁶⁰ J.S.S. Brame, “Power Fuel for the Services,” *RUSI Journal* 76, no. 501 (November 1931): 64-81. Brame also published *Service Chemistry: Being a Short Manual of Chemistry and Metallurgy and their Application in the Naval and Military Services* (London: Edward Arnold, 1920), and *Fuel: Solid, Liquid, and Gaseous* (London: Edward Arnold, 1924).

²⁶¹ Brame discussed oil’s high burning temperature, its high calorific value per volume, and its ease of handling and storing.

²⁶² Brame, “Power Fuel for the Services,” 81. Skelton did not elaborate on how the use of coal would so dramatically influence the Navy’s power and endurance. Sir Reginald William Skelton served in the submarine service from 1906-1918, and was Engineer-in-Chief of the Fleet from 1928 until his retirement in 1932. See “Obituary. Sir Reginald Skelton,” *The Times*, 6 September 1956, 10.

proposal to return to coal as being uninformed and impractical – if not foolhardy. Skelton was proud of the Admiralty's decision to switch to oil, and noted that "His Majesty's Navy can say that they were the pioneers of oil fuel firing," and that "in spite of the fact that oil is not produced in this country, we were the first Navy to adopt it and develop it, even before the Mercantile Marine."²⁶³ The anti-oil movement's desire to return to the use of coal, Skelton believed, was a regressive and dangerous proposal. The Admiral's firm position in favour of oil was based upon the premise that the development of the fuel had been an evolutionary, progressive process. He viewed technology as something that advanced along a linear, forward moving path, in a manner that brought inherent improvement. On the other hand, Skelton believed that the return to the use of coal would be a regressive act that would mean a 'return' to a technology from 'the past.' Skelton concluded the lecture by stating that the anti-oil movement was uninformed and overemotional; Brame's arguments, he noted, "showed how very little those people who make statements about going back to coal have looked into the subject."²⁶⁴

During 1931 the barbed exchanges between the Government and the naval community on one side, and the anti-oil movement on the other, were signs that neither side was willing to concede ground. In the first months of 1932, the anti-oil movement redoubled its efforts, once again engaging with officials in political circles. On 21 April the Back to Coal Movement sent its second deputation to London to meet with the National Government of Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin. The meeting was

²⁶³ Brame, "Power Fuel for the Services," 80-81.

²⁶⁴ Brame, "Power Fuel for the Services," 81. Two weeks after Brame's lecture the *RUSI Journal* published a copy of the response that Ammon had presented to the Back to Coal Movement deputation. The journal provided no analysis of the pro-coal concerns, and did not include the deputation's responses to Ammon's statements. See "Coal or Oil as Fuel for the Navy," *RUSI Journal* 76, no. 503 (November 1931): 634-637.

similar to the deputation that met with Ammon. It took place in a formal discursive setting – discussing issues of grand strategy and international affairs with the producers and practitioners of policy. The power dynamics at play, however, were markedly different. The delegation was comprised of the chief representatives of a staple British industry, and, more importantly, the most distressed area in the country. Baldwin, an ex-Prime Minister and at that time Deputy Prime Minister, was infinitely superior to Ammon. Indeed, the Back to Coal Movement's second deputation was a triumph for the anti-oil campaign.

In anticipation of the Back to Coal deputation, the *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times* published a cartoon that reframed the oil controversy.²⁶⁵ The image includes five scenes, each accompanied by a segment of text. In the first frame, an admiral is shown turning away from a working class man, who is wearing a sign that reads 'Buy British.' The caption reads: "Why should the navy not respect our adopted slogan." In the second frame an admiral, representing the Navy, is depicted with a large contract in his hands, bowing to a likeness of Sir Henri Deterding. The caption reads: 'instead of continuing to buy oil from abroad.'²⁶⁶ When considered together the first two images, and their suggestive captions, provide the viewer with a fundamental premise of the anti-oil campaign – the Admiralty's rejection of the domestic for the reliance on the foreign.

²⁶⁵ "Back to Coal," *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 18 April 1932, 1. See Image C, page 114.

²⁶⁶ Henri Deterding was a Dutchman, and Chairman of the Royal Dutch/Shell oil company from 1900-1936. Deterding was a friend of First Sea Lord John Fisher, who had referred to him as the 'Napoleon of oil.' To many in the anti-oil movement, Deterding was the embodiment of the wily foreign oil magnate. "Deterding, Henri Wilhelm August (1866–1939)," T. A. B. Corley in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2011, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/47932>, (accessed July 29, 2012); "Obituary. Sir Henri Deterding," *The Times*, 6 February 1939, 14. For an example of a critical study of Deterding, see Glyn Roberts, *The Most Powerful Man in the World: the Life of Sir Henri Deterding* (New York: Covici & Freude, 1938).

They repeat the theme of ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ represented as South Wales versus the Admiralty, but also in the form of the nation versus the foreign oil company.

The consequences of the use of oil are represented next. In the third frame, two men with hands in their pockets stand idly outside of a closed colliery. The artist’s inclusion of valleys in the background of this frame suggests the setting is South Wales. The caption reads: ‘whilst our collieries are in dire need of orders.’ The fourth frame illustrates a thick dole line of both men and boys, filing past a dog. The caption reads: ‘and thousands of colliers are destitute.’ Combined, frames three and four illustrate the local and regional consequences of the Admiralty’s abandonment of coal – industrial failure and social distress. They defined the local interests and people that the anti-oil campaign was advocating for, and reasserted the themes of ‘we,’ ‘us,’ and ‘ours.’

The fifth image relocates the consequences and dangers of the Admiralty’s decision from the regional level to the national by refocusing attention on the Back to Coal Movement’s hypothetical wartime scenario. The Admiral from frame two is shown sitting at the edge of his chair, yelling ‘more oil wanted at once!’ into a telephone. On the other end of the line, a man in desert attire stands next to a sign that reads ‘Oil Fields,’ which is situated on a patch of ground entitled ‘Foreign Country.’ He responds to the Admiral’s call with ‘Sorry! Nothing doing!’ At the bottom right of the image, a fish jumps out of the water. The caption reads: ‘What would our position be in war time? – Oil supply cut off! – Fleet Useless!’ The final frame of the cartoon expresses multiple themes, and employs a variety of metaphors and narratives. The scene promotes the anti-oil storyline of the Navy’s fuel supplies being severed in the future as a result of foreign

complications. Using the image of a warship on the horizon, the frame draws on Britain's shared historical experiences with war at sea. The placement of the ship in the top right corner of the image suggests its location in the North Sea, where the indecisive Battle of Jutland was fought in 1916. The metaphor of a fish out of water hints at the Navy's shortage of fuel supplies during the First World War, and implies that a similar situation would occur in the future.²⁶⁷ The frame also presents the anti-oil campaign's theme of 'here' and 'there,' and delivers the message that dangers 'over there' (Middle East) would result in serious threats 'here' (Britain). When combined, the themes and metaphors employed in the frame evoke senses of fear and foreboding about the future.

Two and a half months after the Back to Coal deputation met with Baldwin, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to the Mayor of Cardiff stating that the National Government believed no "useful purpose" would be served by establishing a commission of inquiry into the fuel issue.²⁶⁸ Baldwin's response suggested that the Government had at least considered the concerns of the anti-oil movement, but his refusal to take action on the oil issue illustrated that the administration was content in deferring to the Admiralty's existing fuel policies. Combined, the National Government and the Admiralty created a formidable alliance in defence of the use of oil. Facing such powerful official opposition,

²⁶⁷ During the interwar period, the naval community engaged in debate over the influence of speed in deciding naval battles. Several prominent naval figures, including First World War commander of the Home Fleet, Sir John Jellicoe, argued that the increases in cruising speed that Fisher and Churchill had sought through the introduction of oil fuel proved ineffective at Jutland. For the debate in the *Naval Review*, see "Speed for Battleships," *Naval Review* 9, no. 4 (November 1921): 680-681; "Speed for Battleships," *Naval Review* 10, no. 1 (February 1922): 152-153; "Speed for Battleships," *Naval Review* 10, no. 2 (May 1922): 206-208; "Speed for Battleships," *Naval Review* 11, no. 1 (February 1923): 177-180. For Jellicoe's arguments, see "Oil and Coal Issue," *Western Mail*, 1 May 1931, 8.

²⁶⁸ The exchanges of telegraphs between the Back to Coal Movement and the National Government are printed in Bernard Acworth, *Back to the Coal Standard: The Future of Transport and Power* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1932): 292-394.

the Back to Coal Movement withdrew from its engagement with the proponents of oil and returned to campaigning for the use of coal at the local, popular level in South Wales.

Though the Back to Coal Movement had been officially defeated by the Admiralty and the National Government, Acworth was unwilling to suspend the national campaign against the Navy's use of oil. In November, he published an article in the *South Wales Journal of Commerce* entitled "The Advantages of Coal over Oil."²⁶⁹ In this piece, Acworth reasserted his arguments against the use of oil, stressing, in particular, the national security risks of being dependent upon foreign states for the Navy's fuel. Using the metaphor of a cuckoo, Acworth reframed the themes of invasion and infiltration that had coloured his writings during the 1927-1930 period: "We are forced to the conclusion [he wrote] that since the war we have been harbouring a cuckoo in the national nest, and, therefore, inviting those disasters which naturally overtake those who are native to the nest in which the cuckoo's egg is deposited."²⁷⁰ In this metaphor, Acworth represents Britain as the host nest, and oil as the foreign egg, dropped by international oil companies and foreign oil-producing states. The foreign egg that Britain was incubating would eventually hatch, and begin the process of evicting its hosts. The metaphor continues the anti-oil movement's traditional themes of 'us' and 'them,' 'friend' and 'enemy,' and

²⁶⁹ Bernard Acworth, "The Advantages of Coal over Oil," *South Wales Journal of Commerce Engineering Supplement* (24 November 1932) 1-3. A quarterly publication of 24 pages.

²⁷⁰ Acworth, "The Advantages of Coal over Oil," 3. Acworth wrote frequently on birds. See "Introductory: The Law of Currents," in Bernard Acworth, *The Great Delusion* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927); Bernard Acworth, "The Migration of Storks," *The Times*, 26 September 1933, 15; Bernard Acworth, *This Progress: The Tragedy of Evolution* (London: Rich and Cowan, 1934); Bernard Acworth, *The Cuckoo and Other Bird Mysteries* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1944); Bernard Acworth, *Butterfly Miracles and Mysteries* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1947); Bernard Acworth, *Bird and Butterfly Mysteries: Realities of Migration* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1955).

‘here’ and ‘there.’ In addition, Acworth reframes the proximity and imminence of the foreign oil threat.

Three days after Acworth’s article was published, his cuckoo metaphor was fulfilled. On 27 November, the Persian government, which had recently undergone a series of constitutional reforms, suspended the Anglo-Persian Oil Company’s (APOC) concession in a drive to nationalise the state’s oil resources.²⁷¹ The British government was the majority shareholder of APOC, which was the third largest oil company in the world. APOC was also the primary supplier of oil fuel for the Royal Navy.²⁷² The Anglo-Persian oil dispute was the first time during the interwar period that Britain’s supplies of foreign oil were seriously jeopardised, and over the course of the next six months APOC and the British government engaged in difficult negotiations to redraw the terms of the concession using economic, legal, and military channels.²⁷³ The dispute was not resolved until February 1933, when Sir John Cadman, chairman of APOC, travelled to Tehran for an emergency meeting and negotiated a sixty year extension on the British oil concession.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ “Our Foreign Oil Supplies,” *Western Mail*, 29 November 1932, 8. In 1933 Persia was the fifth largest producer of oil in the world.

²⁷² A.C. Millspaugh, “The Persian-British oil Dispute,” *Foreign Affairs* 11, no. 3 (April 1933): 521.

²⁷³ Peter J. Beck, “The Anglo-Persian Oil Dispute,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 4 (October 1974): 132-136. The British government contemplated economic sanctions and military action, while the Persian government threatened to take the dispute to the League of Nations for arbitration.

²⁷⁴ Sir John Cadman was Chairman of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company from 1927-1941. In 1913, at the request of the Admiralty, he travelled to Persia to investigate the long-term supply of oil there. His report convinced Churchill to push for the Government to purchase a controlling share of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. “Cadman, John, first Baron Cadman (1877–1941),” H. S. Torrens in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eee online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, Oxford: OUP, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/32233>, (accessed July 29, 2012). The concession was suspended again in March 1951, when the Iranian Government successfully nationalised the state’s oil fields.

The disruption of Britain's overseas supplies of oil was a boon to the anti-oil campaign. The suddenness of the Persian Government's actions supported Acworth's thesis that international oil companies and foreign oil producing states were unpredictable and unreliable. In his publications over the period 1927-1930, Acworth had explicitly and repeatedly identified Britain's Persian oil supplies as being dangerously unstable. In *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, for example, he predicted correctly that "it is at its *source*, rather than on the high seas, that [oil] will be cut off."²⁷⁵ In his local popular campaign in South Wales, Acworth further developed the Persian theme, portraying Arabs as "hostile," "unfriendly" "tribesmen."²⁷⁶ The Anglo-Persian incident illustrated that the threats from 'out there' could cause serious injuries 'over here.'

In South Wales, the incident was seen as being another piece of evidence in support of the anti-oil message. The *Colliery Guardian* was eager to point out the irony of the Royal Navy's predicament. "The Persian quarrel must give us pause to think," its editor wrote. "It is very disquieting to feel that the Navy is so dependent upon the whim of an Oriental autocracy that, if we contemplated an expedition to enforce a concessionary right in which the British Government has a preponderant interest, we might be unable to fuel the ships that took part in it."²⁷⁷ On 5 December, the *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times* produced a third cartoon illustrating the incident and reinforcing the messages of the anti-oil movement.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Acworth, *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, 128. Italics in the original.

²⁷⁶ See for example, "Back to Coal," *Western Mail*, 31 March 1931, 6; "Welsh Coal for the Navy. An Industry's Fight for Life," *Western Mail*, 1 April 1931, 6.

²⁷⁷ "A Point for Capt. Acworth," *Colliery Guardian* (2 December 1932): 1050.

²⁷⁸ "The Cat Among the Pigeons," *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 5 December 1932, 1.

The cartoon is based upon Acworth's avian metaphor.²⁷⁹ In the foreground is pictured a birdhouse entitled 'Foreign Oil Supply,' which is being circled by pigeons wearing the traditional cocked hats of the Admiralty. The birds, representing 'British Naval Experts,' are shown circling their birdhouse after being ejected by an angry cat, entitled 'Persian Rum-Pus.'²⁸⁰ On the left of the image is 'The British Coal House,' adorned with a miner's lantern. At the base of the house stands the figure of John Bull, looking baffled with his hands on his head. Acworth is shown calmly pointing at the Persian birdhouse. The caption reads: 'Capt. Bernard Acworth, D.S.O., R.N.: I know of a safer food supply than that, John.'

The cartoon reframes the popular understanding of the anti-oil movement's theme of 'us' versus 'them.' Acworth is portrayed in an intimate, confidential relationship with John Bull, which shifts the location of the consequences of the Navy's use of oil from the local, regional level to the national. The cartoon suggests that the anti-oil campaign was being waged against 'the Admiralty' and 'the foreigner' on behalf of 'the British people.' Furthermore, the positioning of the 'naval experts' outside Britain sends a message that the Admiralty and Government had abandoned John Bull and were operating in foreign states in ways that were external to the country and the desires of its people. The cartoon also includes a geographic dimension, and portrays the dangers of oil as being foreign, existing 'over there' and causing problems 'here,' in Britain. Taken as a whole, the *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times's* image reasserts the anti-oil movement's driving thesis, and reassures the proponents of a return to coal that their concerns and proposals were

²⁷⁹ See Image D, 115.

²⁸⁰ The play on the word rumpus is, most likely, an allusion to the Navy's rum ration and the cats that were kept on warships to hunt vermin.

legitimate. Unsurprisingly, Acworth possessed a certain degree of *schadenfreude* after the incident. As he wrote to the *Western Mail* in late December, “may I say, in fairness to myself, that I personally resisted the temptation to say, ‘I told you so’ when the Persian oil debacle arose.”²⁸¹

Acworth and the anti-oil movement used the Persian oil incident to take their campaign to a larger national audience. In mid-November 1933, Acworth delivered a lecture to the Great Western Railway Lecture and Debating Society, entitled “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power.”²⁸² Sir John Cadman was chair that evening, and a large audience had filled the London lecture hall to witness the showdown between two of the most recognized proponents of oil and of coal. Using the metaphor of the body that he had employed in his writings during the 1927-1930 period, Acworth began his lecture with a firm statement on the severity and immediacy of the oil fuel dilemma: “On the economic significance of coal to Great Britain [he declared] there is no need to dwell at length. Fuel is to the civilised activities of an industrial country what food is to the natural body.”²⁸³ Acworth dedicated the rest of his lecture to a discussion of the dramatic decreases in Welsh coal exports, Britain’s £960 million trade deficit, the 365 000 British miners that were unemployed, and the ten million tons of British vessels, including the Royal Navy and the Merchant Marine, which had “discarded the national fuel for a

²⁸¹ “The Navy’s Fuel Supplies. Captain Bernard Acworth’s Reply,” *Western Mail*, 28 December 1932, 12.

²⁸² Bernard Acworth, “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power,” *Great Western Railway (London) Lecture and Debating Society*, no. 276 (16 November 1933): 1-13. The Great Western Railway Company was one of the largest and most important railway companies in the United Kingdom, which managed, among others, the main route from Wales to London. See Oswald S. Nock, *Great Western Railway in the Twentieth Century* (London: George Allan, 1964).

²⁸³ Acworth, “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power,” 2.

foreign one.”²⁸⁴ The thrust of Acworth’s talk was a familiar one: that coal was the basis of Britain’s industrial, economic, and social life, and that the use of foreign oil had undermined the nation’s domestic and international strength. He continued to frame the issue as being one of ‘their fuel’ versus ‘our fuel,’ the ‘foreign’ versus the ‘domestic.’ The Navy’s oil policies were portrayed as being contrary to the national interest, and Acworth repeated the conception of ‘them,’ the Admiralty and Government, versus ‘us,’ the people. Drawing upon nationalistic narratives to exalt coal, Acworth simultaneously defined the use of oil as being unpatriotic.

In reply Cadman pounced on Acworth. He stated that “as Chairman of the meeting, it was his duty to hold the balance and, incidentally, to correct any errors of fact which might distort the views of the audience.”²⁸⁵ Embracing his prerogative, Cadman systematically refuted Acworth’s arguments against oil, and accused him of knowingly misrepresenting the benefits of coal. Oil was in all respects superior to coal and it had become the fuel of the modern age, Cadman assured the audience. After objecting to Acworth’s claims, Cadman attacked the credibility of the anti-oil movement. “The advocates of a ‘return to coal’ too often fell into the error of refusing to recognise any of the merits of oil,” he reported. “‘Progress’ not ‘recrimination’ should be its watchword.”²⁸⁶ Significantly, Cadman did not engage with Acworth’s arguments about the tenuousness of the nation’s overseas supply of oil, or its dependency upon unpredictable foreign states.

²⁸⁴ Acworth, “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power,” 2.

²⁸⁵ Acworth, “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power,” 11.

²⁸⁶ Acworth, “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power,” 12.

Three more discussants rose to censure Acworth and the anti-oil movement. The first stated that Acworth was “a gallant supporter of forlorn hopes,” and that it was “too late now to put the clock back” in regards to the Navy’s fuel supplies.²⁸⁷ Another expressed his belief that the use of oil had nothing to do with the distress in the coalmining regions, and asked if the coal industry’s problems were not “due to lack of effort on their own part.”²⁸⁸ The third argued that oil was the way of the future, and that it was the only fuel that could provide strength for the Navy and the nation:

In the last twenty years wonderful progress has been achieved as a result of a cheap supply of petrol. . . If we are to hold our own against other countries we could not consider [Acworth’s] idealistic point of view. . . Progress was essential, and progress did not lead back to the canal barge or other means of slow transport.²⁸⁹

The body of pro-oil supporters that assembled in London that evening did not share in any of the anti-oil movement’s understandings about the use of oil. They unanimously rejected Acworth’s premise that the Navy’s fuel policy raised issues of the foreign and the domestic, us and them, ours and theirs. Instead, they viewed the fuel issue as being characterised by the themes of the future and the past, progress and regress, benefit and detriment. The four discussants considered the anti-oil message as being anti-modern and anti-progressive. They conceptualized coal as being from the past, and oil as being of the future. The essential priority of the Navy, they argued, was to continue advancing along what they perceived to be a pre-determined technological trajectory. Acworth’s lecture was seen not as a warning of the future, but, rather, as a nostalgic desire to return to the

²⁸⁷ Acworth, “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power,” 12. Cited as ‘Mr. Wheeler.’

²⁸⁸ Acworth, “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power,” 12. Cited as ‘Mr. A.E. Lyons.’

²⁸⁹ Acworth, “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power,” 13. Cited as ‘Mr. Quartermaine.’

past. When his critics finished their assault, Acworth stated that he had a clock at home, “and if it went wrong, he put it right.”²⁹⁰

In the autumn of 1933, members of the naval community launched a campaign dedicated to discrediting the arguments of the anti-oil movement and attacking its members.²⁹¹ In November, the *Naval Review* published two anonymously authored essays entitled “The Navy’s Fuel,” which sought to defend the pro-oil position and reframe the confines of the fuel debate.²⁹² The essays hit Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement with a broadside of criticism. The first piece, written by ‘H.G.T.,’ criticised Acworth as being hyperbolic, over emotional, and prone to fear mongering. The article portrayed the anti-oil campaign as being misguided by Acworth’s excessive enthusiasm, and casted the proponents of a return to coal in the Navy as dangerously naïve. “The fuel situation in this country is, as he very rightly points out, serious, and demands the most serious consideration,” HGT admitted, “but that consideration must be dispassionate, and unswayed by prejudice or slogans, if it is to be the parent of action which shall be useful and not harmful.”²⁹³ HGT’s resistance to the anti-oil campaign was based upon similar premises to those of other naval commentators, namely, that coal was from the past and oil was of the future. In his view, the age of coal had come to an end, and the anti-oil movement needed to accept, if not embrace, this fact:

²⁹⁰ Acworth, “Coal in Relation to Transport and Power,” 13.

²⁹¹ Warwick Michael Brown states that in 1933 the Admiralty “enlisted” retired naval officers to publicly challenge Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement. He does not, unfortunately, provide evidence that the attacks from within the naval community were officially sanctioned. Warwick Michael Brown, “The Royal Navy’s Fuel Supplies, 1898-1939; The Transition from Coal to Oil” (PhD diss., King’s College, 2003): 256.

²⁹² ‘H.G.T.’, “The Navy’s Fuel I,” *Naval Review* 21, no. 4 (November 1933): 729-734; ‘E.L.R.’, “The Navy’s Fuel II,” *Naval Review* 21, no. 4 (November 1933): 734-736.

²⁹³ HGT, “The Navy’s Fuel I,” 729.

The pre-eminent position of British raw coal as the fuel of transport and industry . . . can no more be restored to-day than can the iron industry of Surrey and Sussex that provided King Alfred with his weapons and armour; and it is as well that we should recognise that inexorable fact if we are to adapt ourselves and our national well-being to the conditions of our age. . . Things are not quite so hopeless as Captain Acworth would have us believe.²⁹⁴

The author was equally critical of the Back to Coal Movement. Like many of his naval colleagues, HGT perceived the organization to be exclusively interested in promoting their personal, regional interests in South Wales. “Navies cannot afford to forgo the modern weapons that liquid fuel makes possible out of sympathy for unemployed miners,” he wrote.²⁹⁵ Here, HGT illustrates his conception of the fuel debate as a conflict of interest between a national majority and a local minority. Oil improved ‘our’ *national* well-being; coal improved ‘their’ *regional* well-being. The ‘us’ that the author identified with, however, was decidedly a minority in 1933: “It is not helpful to tell the general public that it ought not to like careening over the country in its Baby Austins or Morris Minors, but ought to be content to stay at home or travel by train if it cannot afford to keep horses.”²⁹⁶

HGT’s essay was an attempt to discredit the anti-oil movement by belittling it and labelling their fears as irrational and unfounded. He recognised some negative implications of the Navy’s use of oil, but he failed to see the immediacy of the dangers or the severity of the consequences.²⁹⁷ He attacked the proponents of coal as being

²⁹⁴ HGT, “The Navy’s Fuel I” 730.

²⁹⁵ HGT, “The Navy’s Fuel I,” 732.

²⁹⁶ HGT, “The Navy’s Fuel I,” 729. HGT added to this that “Captain Acworth perhaps believes that the modern seaman *ought* not to need bathrooms, bakeries, general messing, reading rooms, and the like.”

²⁹⁷ In particular, HGT believed that the British Government was losing great sums of money in buying foreign oil, and he wished to see more produced in Britain, either through drilling or the chemical treatment of coal. But, as he wrote, “the inventor who suddenly hits upon a new method of power production, which in a trice revolutionises engineering and makes its discoverer’s fortune, does not exist in real life. . . The

regressive, old fashioned, and counterproductive. The anti-oil movement's campaign was futile, HGT concluded. "The plain truth," he wrote, "is that the day of raw coal as the source of peripatetic power is passing, if not passed, and this fact must be recognized and accepted."²⁹⁸

'E.L.R.,' the anonymous author of the second essay, was more optimistic than HGT about the future of coal; he believed that there would always be household and industrial markets for the fuel. In regards to the Navy's use of coal, however, ELR was as dismissive as HGT: "it is a waste of time to preach this 'Back to Coal' doctrine."²⁹⁹ ELR conceived of technologies as evolutionary entities that emerged in sequence. New technologies, such as oil, were inherently superior to their predecessors, such as coal. From this perspective, ELR argued that Britain could not step backward to 'return' to coal while the rest of the world moved 'forward' with oil. "Reversion to coal would involve retracing our steps and taking another road, which would cause a severe, even if only temporary, check to naval progress," he argued. "We are, and must be, concerned with what is, not with what might have been or may be in the future."³⁰⁰ To both HGT and ELR, therefore, the anti-oil movement was too worried about the future and too pre-occupied with the past.

In the spring of 1934, the upper echelon of the naval community assembled at the Royal United Services Institute in London to hear a lecture delivered by Vice-Admiral

fact that he has not yet appeared is not a valid reason for damning the use of liquid fuel altogether." HGT, "The Navy's Fuel I," 733.

²⁹⁸ HGT, "The Navy's Fuel I," 732.

²⁹⁹ ELR, "The Navy's Fuel II," 734.

³⁰⁰ ELR, "The Navy's Fuel II," 734.

Sir R.W. Skelton on the question of “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy.”³⁰¹ The chairman of the evening was former Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, who had been the Navy’s highest ranking officer from 1930-1931.³⁰² Skelton’s lecture was a rancorous attack on the anti-oil movement. His introductory remarks were loaded with implied and explicit messages for the audience: “Coal *versus* oil fuel for the Navy has, as a matter of fact, ceased to exist for some years as a controversial question for the responsible authorities. . . It can also be said that all thinking naval Executive and Engineer Officers, and Naval Architects are agreed that the fuel of to-day must be liquid.”³⁰³ Skelton made clear that those in favour of the use of oil were responsible, held authority, and had thought about the issue, while at the same time implying that those in favour of a return to coal were irresponsible, held no authority, and had not thought about the issue. The Admiral professed to understand why some laymen remained confused about the navy’s fuel policy:

Since this country does not, unfortunately, possess within these islands, any known appreciable source of natural oil, but does possess large quantities of the best steam-raising coal, it is quite natural that those people who earn their livelihood from coal should be bitterly disappointed that their fuel cannot now be made use of in the British Navy, and that misled by the less responsible publicists and supported by even less reputable facts and data, they should from time to time question naval policy and plead for sympathy.³⁰⁴

Skelton’s comments illustrate his framing of the oil debate as a contest between ‘us,’ in the Navy, and ‘them,’ in anti-oil movement. Skelton, however, takes the dichotomy a step

³⁰¹ Sir R.W. Skelton, “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy,” *RUSI Journal* (14 March 1934): 241-160.

³⁰² Keyes was commander of the submarine service from 1912-1914, and Admiral of the Fleet from 1930-1931. “Keyes, Roger John Brownlow, first Baron Keyes (1872–1945),” Paul G. Halpern in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2012, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/34309>, (accessed July 29, 2012).

³⁰³ Skelton, “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy,” 241.

³⁰⁴ Skelton, “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy,” 241.

further by suggesting that oil was the fuel that ‘we’ used, and that coal was the fuel that ‘they’ wanted ‘us’ to return to. Indeed, Skelton explicitly refers to coal as “their fuel.” In making this distinction, Skelton situates the importance of coal in a regional, local context. At the same time, he expresses the oil fuel issue as existing exclusively in the realm of naval, rather than national, policy. At once, Skelton paints the anti-oil movement as an insular, regional body that had no standing in contending with the Navy’s fuel policy.

Skelton defended the Admiralty’s oil policy using what were, by now, familiar arguments. The age of coal was long past, and so too was the opportunity for the proponents of coal to influence the Navy’s energy trajectory. “The truth is, of course, that you cannot stop the march of progress,” he confirmed.³⁰⁵ The development of oil had been an evolutionary process that the Royal Navy had spearheaded, and returning to the use of an older ‘generation’ of fuel was seen as anathema to Skelton. “Do not let us play with this question,” he concluded on the use of coal in the Navy, “the fact is we should render our fleet useless for the defence of our empire.”³⁰⁶

The first opportunity to ask questions of Skelton was granted to Acworth. He began by attempting to immobilise the lecturer, stating that he had discussed the fuel question “as an engineer to whom a machine, as a machine, was everything.”³⁰⁷ Acworth asserted that he approached the subject with a perspective that was more inclusive of the

³⁰⁵ Skelton, “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy,” 245.

³⁰⁶ Skelton, “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy,” 255. Skelton came to this conclusion by arguing that oil supplies existed throughout the world, while coal supplies existed only in Wales. He predicted that a future war would be fought away from British home waters, and that exporting Welsh coal to the theatre of war would be more difficult than purchasing oil from nearby fields.

³⁰⁷ Skelton, “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy,” 255.

social, economic, and political ramifications of the use of foreign oil. "The ability of the Navy to move was really not an engineering question," he said. "All great engineers had confirmed that."³⁰⁸ Naval architects and engineers had not foreseen the severe shortages of oil in the First World War, and they were not able to mitigate the contemporary problems of controlling and protecting the nation's supply of Middle Eastern oil. The Navy's dependence on foreign fuel was a national liability, Acworth concluded, which could only be redressed by returning to the use of Britain's traditional, local, secure fuel – coal.³⁰⁹

Acworth's comments that evening were remarkably bold. He alleged that the Admiralty was unqualified, if not incapable, of understanding the consequences of the Navy's use of oil. Furthermore, he implied that the Admiralty's obsession with technical advancement was crippling the Navy and jeopardising national security. Unsurprisingly, many in the audience were outraged at his remarks. Admiral Sir Sydney Fremantle rose to attack Acworth and the anti-oil movement, asserting that their campaign was insignificant, futile, and, in fact, counter-productive. Evoking Skelton's distinctions between 'us' and 'them,' Fremantle condemned the proponents of coal:

If I might venture to give a little advice, I would recommend those gentlemen who wished to go back to coal to cease from fighting for a lost cause. Such a procedure took up a very considerable amount of time of officials in continually answering their arguments, as well as wasting their own time. They had much better devote themselves to finding economical means of converting the coal in which they were so much interested into oil.³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Skelton, "Coal Versus Oil for the Navy," 255.

³⁰⁹ Skelton, "Coal Versus Oil for the Navy," 255.

³¹⁰ Skelton, "Coal Versus Oil for the Navy," 256. Sir Sydney Fremantle was Commander-in-Chief of the Portsmouth Naval Base, where Acworth was commander of the detention centre, from 1923-1926. "Obituary. Admiral Sir Sydney Fremantle," *The Times*, 30 April 1958, 14.

Freemantle's sardonic comments were echoed by Admiral Sir William Goodenough, who pursued the argument that the anti-oil movement was regressive and anti-modern.³¹¹

Advocates of a return to coal were searching for security in the familiarity of the past, Goodenough believed. Their fears of the future were as irrational as their pro-coal proposals: "Those who argued on such lines would presently desire to go back to masts and sails, then to oars, and finally to that remarkable type of craft which had no method of propulsion at all, namely, the Ark."³¹² Coal had been the foundation of Britain's industrial empire, Goodenough admitted, but Britain was in an age of oil. In this new age, oil, rather than coal, provided the country with the modern energy required to sustain "the Empire, our food, our freedom, and everything that had made us what we were."³¹³

The chair, Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, was last to comment on the lecture and the discussion that followed. Keyes was more delicate in expressing his criticisms of Acworth and the anti-oil movement, but his comments were equally as derisive. "I must congratulate Captain Acworth on his courage in rising and putting his case after such a damning indictment of coal as against oil," stated the Admiral. Keyes acknowledged the legitimacy of the anti-oil movement's concerns about the security of the nation's supplies of foreign fuel. "That, of course, must always be a great anxiety," he said, but the difficulty of distance could be overcome by the creation of stockpiles and through the

³¹¹ Skelton, "Coal Versus Oil for the Navy," 258. Sir William Goodenough was a distinguished naval officer who had fought at Heligoland Bight, Dogger Bank, and Jutland in the First World War. He was promoted to the rank of Admiral in 1925, and retired in 1930. W. Baddeley, "Goodenough, Sir William Edmund (1867–1945)," rev. Marc Brodie, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2012, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/33452>, (accessed July 29, 2012).

³¹² Skelton, "Coal Versus Oil for the Navy," 258.

³¹³ Skelton, "Coal Versus Oil for the Navy," 259.

maintenance of a globally superior Navy.³¹⁴ Keyes concluded the evening with a vote of thanks to the lecturer for his “admirably clear” discussion on the subject of the Navy’s fuel, which he believed had settled the issue once and for all: “After this lecture I do not think that anyone can doubt that coal as a fuel for the Navy is dead.”³¹⁵ Acworth and the anti-oil movement had been dismissed.

Acworth was not discouraged by the Admiralty’s assault on his anti-oil campaign. Instead, he continued to pursue the development and dissemination of his popular message. In the summer of 1934 he published *The Navy and the Next War: a Vindication of Sea Power*.³¹⁶ The book exposed what Acworth believed were serious weaknesses in the warships of the Royal Navy, and argued that the Admiralty’s administrative and strategic policies were setting Britain up for defeat in a future war. In a chapter entitled “Food and Fuel,” Acworth portrayed the Navy’s dependence upon oil as “our Achilles’ heel,” a metaphor that evoked fears of vulnerability and defeat. His predictions for the future became noticeably more fatalistic: “If the supply of fuel stops, or is seriously curtailed, Great Britain must become the victim of a catastrophe unequalled in the history

³¹⁴ Skelton, “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy,” 259. The creation of stockpiles of oil in Britain was discussed by the naval community throughout the interwar period. See for example, J.W. Gregory, “The Future of Oil Supply,” *Contemporary Review* 119 (January 1921): 778-786; Sir E.J.W. Slade, “Oil Supplies in War,” *RUSI Journal* 71 (November 1926): 119-142; G.M. Ross, “Imported Oil or Native Coal?” *RUSI Journal* 72 (February 1927): 137-143; J.S.S. Brame, “Power Fuel for the Services,” *RUSI Journal* 76 (November 1931): 64-81; Sir R.W. Skelton, “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy,” *RUSI Journal* 79 (February 1934): 241-260; Andrew Agnew, “Empire Oil Supplies in War,” *RUSI Journal* 80 (November 1935): 278-296; ‘S.D.S.’, “The Fuel of the Future?” *Naval Review* 23, no. 2 (May 1935): 458-459; W.A. Bristow, “Oil from Coal in Wartime,” *RUSI Journal* 81 (November 1936): 40-60; Alfred Nash, “The Fuel Supplies of Great Britain,” *Royal Society of Arts Journal* 85, no. 4416 (July 1937): 788-797.

³¹⁵ Skelton, “Coal Versus Oil for the Navy,” 259.

³¹⁶ Bernard Acworth, *The Navy and the Next War: A Vindication of Sea Power* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1934). The book, a sequel to *The Navies of Today and Tomorrow*, included four new chapters.

of civilized countries.”³¹⁷ Acworth also took the opportunity to respond to critics’ accusations that the anti-oil movement was regressive and anti-modern:

It is sometimes said that the growing substitution of oil for coal is no more than an aspect of what is loosely called ‘natural evolution,’ an alternative term for ‘progress.’ Yet man has surely not ceased to be a free agent in selecting a line of progress which does not conflict with his well being. He can still be the master of his fate.³¹⁸

In *The Navy and the Next War*, Acworth reasserted the anti-oil movement’s popular themes of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ He portrayed the Navy’s use of oil as encompassing a series of conflicts between the Admiralty and the anti-oil movement, the Admiralty and the people, and Britain and the foreigner. He drew conclusions that delivered the message that ‘we’ were in danger because of ‘their’ policies, and that ‘they’ – the Admiralty and the foreigner – would ruin ‘us’ in a future war. On the other hand, Acworth stressed the idea that the use of oil was a choice, and, more importantly, ‘our’ choice. The driving message of the chapter was that the British people had been drawn into danger by the Admiralty, and that it was their responsibility to demand a return to the safety and security of British coal.

In May 1934, HGT published a review of *The Navy and the Next War* in the *Naval Review*.³¹⁹ The piece is deeply critical of the ways in which Acworth enframed the oil issue with popular slogans and colourful metaphors. The brunt of HGT’s criticism focusses on the style, rather than the substance, of the book. He accuses Acworth of being a sensationalist and of using hyperbole to persuade a popular audience of the merits of his

³¹⁷ Acworth, *The Navy and the Next War*, 50.

³¹⁸ Acworth, *The Navy and the Next War*, 293.

³¹⁹ ‘H.G.T.’, “Review: *The Navy and the Next War* by Captain Bernard Acworth,” *Naval Review* 22, no. 2 (May 1934): 372-376.

case. The informed reader was interested in facts, HGT asserted, and Acworth's embellishments were "likely merely to cause the hostile critic to comment that the author's premises are wildly improbable, to conclude that he has no case, and to disregard the remainder of his argument as futile."³²⁰

HGT's review performs several functions. It portrays the anti-oil movement as being in opposition to the proponents of oil, and creates a distinct impression of 'us' versus 'them.' HGT's scathing attacks on Acworth's premises and conclusions takes the distinction further, however, by suggesting that the anti-oil movement was so fundamentally subjective and absurd that it should be ignored by the naval community. In this sense, the review suggests that the anti-oil movement held no legitimacy in the national conversations on fuel and security. In HGT's view, the oil controversy was an issue that could only be understood and managed by executive naval officers – it was 'our' problem that 'we' would handle internally. Acworth, however, was not deterred.

Acworth was particularly vigorous in promoting the popular anti-oil campaign during the second half of the 1930s.³²¹ In September 1937, he published *Britain in Danger: an Examination of Our New Navy*.³²² The book's driving argument was that the Navy would be useless in a future war and that the Admiralty's misguided policies had

³²⁰ HGT, "Review: *The Navy and the Next War* by Captain Bernard Acworth," 374.

³²¹ In 1935 Acworth published a second edition to *The Navy and the Next War*, which he renamed *The Restoration of England's Sea Power*. Acworth added three new chapters to the book, including 'Collective Security,' 'Air Power and Sea Power,' and 'Anglo-German Naval Treaty.' Bernard Acworth, *The Restoration of England's Sea Power* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1935). HGT reviewed the book in the *Naval Review*, but did not take up any discussion of Acworth's arguments against the use of oil. See 'H.G.T.', "Review: *The Restoration of England's Sea Power*, by Captain Bernard Acworth," *Naval Review* 23, no. 4 (November 1935): 853-856.

³²² Bernard Acworth, *Britain in Danger: an Examination of Our New Navy* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1937). The book of 284 pages included chapters such as: 'Are We Building the Right Kind of Fleet?'; 'What is Our Naval Policy?' and 'British and Foreign Vessels Compared.'

brought the nation to the brink of defeat. Acworth argued that in order to appease the demands of foreigners, the Admiralty had constructed a collection of what he termed “floating Whitehalls,” “aquatic dinosaurs,” and “disguised oil tankers.”³²³ He believed that the interwar disarmament agreements were overly constricting and that foreign states had played too large a role in determining British naval policy. In a series of chapters on fuel, Acworth sketched a hypothetical future scenario that involved the sabotage of the Navy’s Persian fuel supplies, the sinking of the nation’s oil tanker fleet, the defeat of the Royal Navy and, eventually, the starvation or surrender of the nation.³²⁴

The arguments and conclusions drawn by Acworth in *Britain in Danger* were the fruits of seven years of writing, lecturing, campaigning, electioneering, and lobbying against the use of oil in the Royal Navy. Acworth included in the book all the elements of the anti-oil movement’s popular campaign: familiar slogans, cultural allusions, and metaphorical comparisons. He enframed the consequences of the Navy’s use of foreign oil as being imminent and catastrophic, and presented his most alarming predictions of the future. The most striking difference between *Britain in Danger* and Acworth’s other publications is the pervasiveness of fear and fatalism. The book presented the anti-oil movement’s doomsday scenario in vivid colour and excruciating detail, and delivered the message that Britain was heading toward catastrophe.

Britain in Danger was a victory for Acworth and the anti-oil movement. On the day of its release, dozens of local and national newspapers and periodicals reviewed the

³²³ Acworth, *Britain in Danger*, 38, 42, 76.

³²⁴ See ‘The Navy’s Fuel: Some Lessons of the Late War,’ Chapter VII, 131-142; ‘The Navy’s Fuel: Lessons of the War Disregarded,’ Chapter VII, 143-187; ‘Our Requirements in Fuel,’ Chapter XIV, 220-226; ‘Duel Firing in Men-of-War,’ Appendix I, 275-279, and ‘Oil, Solid Fuels, and National Defence,’ Appendix II, 280-284.

book.³²⁵ The widespread attention accorded the book was a sign that the anti-oil movement had been successful in disseminating its message to not only a national audience, but an international one as well.³²⁶ Positive reviews came from British coalmining regions, in particular. The *Western Mail* was both excited and alarmed by the conclusions reached in the book. The paper's review portrayed Acworth as the honourable and dedicated leader of the anti-oil movement, and imagined him as a crusader fighting an uphill battle for 'us' against a powerful and entrenched enemy:

Captain Acworth's keenest shafts are reserved for his attack on the Admiralty oil fuel policy for the Navy. . . It is doubtful whether his case has been so fully elaborated or so appositely stated. . . Capt. Acworth has written with his usual excellence of style and command of language, and anyone suspecting that he has either a bee in his bonnet or an axe to grind will quickly be disabused by the sincerity and the mathematical accuracy of his basic thesis. 'Britain in Danger' is the loyal, vigorous outcry of an expert who is not afraid to disagree with other experts, and whose only concern is to see England strong and mighty.³²⁷

Acworth's book was positively reviewed in coalmining regions outside of Wales as well.

The *Yorkshire Evening News*, the *Nottingham Guardian*, and the *Newcastle Daily*

Journal wrote that Acworth had drawn "frightening" and "prophetic pictures" of the

future, illustrating their belief in the merits of the anti-oil movement's narrative.³²⁸ The

Newcastle Evening Chronicle's review presented the oil controversy as a conflict

³²⁵ Acworth hired the International Press-Cutting Bureau, London, to compile reviews of *Britain in Danger*. The following are found in a bound volume in the private papers of Bernard Acworth. The clippings do not include page numbers.

³²⁶ See for example, "Britannien in Gefahr," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 18 September 1937; "Combustione mista delle navi da guerra Britanniche," *Rivista Marittima* (Rome), June, 1938; "Claims British Warships are Ferry-Built," *St. John's Evening Telegram* (Newfoundland), 14 October 1937; "British Warships Scored as Targets," *New York Times*, 19 September 1937, 28; "Reviews," *Milwaukee Journal*, 21 November 1937; "The New Navy," *Christchurch Press*, 27 November 1937; "Britain's New Navy and Its Problems," *Auckland Star*, 11 December 1937; "Current Literature. Sea Power To-Day," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 December 1937.

³²⁷ "Captain Acworth on Jerry-Built Warships," *Western Mail*, 17 September 1937.

³²⁸ "Floating Whitehalls," *Yorkshire Evening News* (Leeds), 17 September 1937; "Britain's New Warships Criticized," *Nottingham Guardian*, 17 September 1937; "Britain's Ships Being 'Jerry-Built,'" *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 17 September.

between the anti-oil movement, which represented the average citizen, and the Admiralty, which represented foreign states and international oil companies. Acworth was ‘our’ leader in the fight against ‘them,’ the paper suggested, writing that he was “the man who ‘lets the Admiralty have it,’ and who tells us just how the taxpayers’ money is being wasted on ships too big to fight, and too slow to run away.”³²⁹

Britain in Danger was reviewed by several London-based publications. The positive responses to the book in the capital were significant for Acworth and the anti-oil movement, as they provided evidence that the anti-oil movement had been successful in enframing the oil-fuel debate as a distinctly national concern. The dominant theme of the reviews coming out of London was that the Admiralty had been negligent in responding to the concerns of the anti-oil movement, and, in a general sense, careless in its handling of the oil controversy. The *News Chronicle* described Acworth as “one of the foremost naval critics in the British Empire,” and noted that his “formidable arguments . . . have never been answered; [...] it is unfortunate that foreign Admiralties, instead of our own naval advisors, appear to be taking his lessons to heart.”³³⁰ The author demanded that the Admiralty cease its stonewalling of the anti-oil movement, and begin to approach the fuel issue as one that affected a multiplicity of national interests. The book, he hoped, would be read “with an unprejudiced mind by the First Lord himself, as well as by every

³²⁹ “Captain Acworth attacks ‘All Wrong’ Admiralty Policy,” *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 17 September 1937.

³³⁰ “A Naval Critic is Answered,” *News Chronicle*, 21 September 1937.

member of Parliament, and that a really honest attempt will be made to face up to all its implications.”³³¹

G.K. 's Weekly expressed a similar dissatisfaction with the Admiralty's handling of the fuel controversy.³³² The author of its review of *Britain in Danger* believed that Acworth, “the most severe critic of Admiralty policy,” had been unjustly resisted by the proponents of oil, and that the arguments contained in the book required immediate consideration. The author describes the exchanges between the proponents of oil and coal using the anti-oil movement's narrative of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ Acworth is upheld as a stalwart champion of the average citizen who, “undiscouraged by the lack of official response,” had dedicated himself to ensuring that the popular voice was able to participate in the national fuel debate. *Britain in Danger* had exposed the Admiralty's intransigence, the author wrote, and revealed that “the matter of oil supplies in war urgently requires more attention and more effective action than it has so far received.”

The editors of the *Horse and Hound* were shocked by the forecasts that Acworth had put forward in *Britain in Danger*, and took issue with the Admiralty's obdurate handling of the oil-fuel controversy. Their review of the book asserted that Acworth had presented “such convincing arguments that he who would controvert him must furnish adequate answers to his reasoning.”³³³ Acworth's book was a frightening revelation, the review asserted, and the naval community could no longer afford to dismiss the concerns

³³¹ “A Naval Critic is Answered,” *News Chronicle*, 21 September 1937. The First Lord was Alfred Duff Cooper, a Conservative friend of Baldwin who was appointed to the position in May. “Cooper, (Alfred) Duff, first Viscount Norwich (1890–1954),” Philip Ziegler in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2011, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/32547>, (accessed July 29, 2012).

³³² “Britain in Danger: By Captain Bernard Acworth,” *G.K. 's Weekly* (London), 21 October 1937.

³³³ “Further Pages in Waiting,” *Horse and Hound* (London), 25 October 1937.

of the anti-oil movement: “This book certainly ought not to be ignored, for it is an eyeopener to the man in the street.” The *Navy*’s review of Acworth’s book was, perhaps, the most exciting for the anti-oil movement. The author believed that *Britain in Danger* had awakened the nation to the gravity of the oil crisis, and that the Admiralty had no choice but to make an official statement on the concerns of the anti-oil movement. Acworth had asked “questions of great importance,” the author wrote, “which shouldn’t be left without answer.”³³⁴

The dominant conclusion in the reviews of *Britain in Danger* was that Acworth had revealed a fatal flaw in the ways in which Britain used and conceptualised fuel. The vast majority of reviews accept Acworth’s arguments against the use of oil, and subscribe to his geopolitical imagination of Britain in danger from a variety of internal and external sources. Taken together, the reviews suggest that the anti-oil movement’s campaign against the Admiralty’s oil policy over the period 1931-1937 had not been fought in vain. The movement’s persistence in framing and reframing the oil issue was successful in creating a distinct popular understanding of the dangerous domestic and international implications of the use of foreign fuel. A major component of the anti-oil movement’s popular campaign was the demarcation between groups that represented the average citizen – ‘us’ – and the foreigner – ‘them.’ The reviews illustrate the efficacy of the movement’s efforts to create the conceptions that they were the champions of an independent and secure Britain, and that the Admiralty had abandoned the nation in favour of the foreigner.

³³⁴ “His Own too Much?” *Navy* (London), October 1937.

Perhaps the greatest triumph of the anti-oil movement, however, was its ability to fend off the attacks of the proponents of oil. Over the period 1931-1937, the anti-oil movement was beset by accusations of being regressive, self-interested and unqualified participants in the oil- fuel debate. The naval community, in particular, exerted significant time and energy in attempting to discredit and silence the movement. They viewed the proponents of a return to coal as being unworthy contributors to the national dialogues on fuel, security, and foreign affairs, and responded to the movement's arguments and lobbying efforts with an admixture of indifference, disagreement, and contempt. The anti-oil movement had two driving goals: to challenge the authority of the Admiralty in making the nation's fuel policy and to promote a new popular understanding of the relationships between Britain, its security, and its coal. Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement's popular resistance to the Navy's use of foreign oil was ultimately successful in reframing the issue as a national, rather than an exclusively naval, concern.

Image B: “In the Balance”

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Source: “In the Balance,” *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 4 July 1931, 1.

Image C: “Back to Coal”

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Source: “Back to Coal,” *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 18 April 1932, 1.

Image D: “The Cat Among the Pigeons”

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Source: “The Cat Among the Pigeons,” *Weekly Mail and Cardiff Times*, 5 December 1932, 1.

Conclusion

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have explored aspects of the Royal Navy's transition from coal to oil, but their analyses have focused exclusively on the political, military, and technical dimensions of the subject. Most have argued that the Navy's transition to oil was a component of an inevitable, linear technological advancement. In the words of one naval historian, "it was a technological phenomenon waiting to happen."³³⁴ Most have also concluded that the Navy's transition to oil was tacitly accepted and even encouraged by British society. Except in passing, the extant literature does not account for the presence of any meaningful opposition to the transition; historians have largely failed to consider the contrasting and competing visions of the political, commercial, industrial and social consequences of the switch to a foreign fuel. In short, the scholarship on the introduction of oil to Britain is missing an important component: the anti-oil voices of dissent.

This study, therefore, sought not only to augment the existing literature on the interwar expressions of resistance to the Royal Navy's use of oil, but to fill a void. To this end three avenues of investigation were pursued. First, the individuals and groups that formulated a critique of oil and the premises upon which their concerns were based were identified. Second, the ways in which the opponents of oil presented their critique to official and to popular audiences were examined. Third, the ways in which these audiences responded to the oil critique and its proponents were explored. To assist in the attainment of these goals, the thesis employed a critical geopolitics approach to analyse

³³⁴ Eric J. Dahl, "Naval Innovation: From Coal to Oil," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Winter 2000/2001): 56.

the expressions of resistance to the Navy's use of oil. The theory was used to enhance awareness of the dynamics of the oil-fuel debate, and of the perceptions of nationalism, security, and geopolitics that coloured the anti-oil movement's critique. The thesis searched for insight into the geopolitical imaginations of the anti-oil movement, and the national and international geopolitical storylines to which they subscribed. Critical geopolitics theory helped to identify the communities to which the anti-oil movement believed Britain belonged and how it defined concepts of 'us' and 'them,' 'ours' and 'theirs,' and 'here' and 'there.' The thesis investigated how these understandings and conceptualisations manifested themselves in the movement's official and popular campaigns. Finally, it explored the ways that popular and official audiences framed and reframed the anti-oil critique using cultural and historical elements, and how differences in the geopolitical understandings of the proponents of coal and oil characterised the interwar fuel debate.

The first chapter of this thesis explored the expression of the anti-oil critique in the writings of Captain Bernard Acworth, DSO, over the period 1927-1930. The chapter investigated Acworth's understanding of the place of Britain in the international system, and what he perceived to be the consequences of the Royal Navy's transition to oil and its dependence upon foreign states. It analysed the ways in which Acworth enframed these consequences using culturally-based narratives, tropes, and metaphors and how these manifested themselves in his engagement with official and popular audiences. The investigation into Acworth's early writings shows that he was a realist who viewed the international system as an inherently dangerous and chaotic environment that was

characterised by continual struggles over resources and territory. He believed the strength of a state was measured by the degree of its independence from foreign countries, and its ability to pursue its interests with autonomy. To Acworth, the Royal Navy and British coal were the primary components of Britain's national security. He perceived oil to be diminishing the Navy's power and independence, consequently limiting Britain's capacity for independent action and to defend itself in war. Indeed, Acworth conceived the use of fuels to be the measure of a nation's cultural, industrial, and military strength. His early writings represented oil as a vile, invasive foreign substance that corrupted Britain's political institutions and created an unhealthy foreign dependency in everyday life. In stark contrast he portrayed coal as a constitutive component of Britain's culture and national life, arguing for the existence of a symbiotic relationship between Britain and coal. Using bodily metaphors and allusions, Bernard Acworth represented coal as a natural, organic substance that coursed through the country, nourishing its people and its industries.

Chapter two examined the local expressions of resistance to the use of oil through the activities of the South Wales Back to Coal Movement over the period 1931-1933. The chapter explored the reception to Acworth's anti-oil critique in South Wales, and its adaptation for a local context. The Back to Coal Movement's regional and national lobbying efforts were investigated and an understanding was obtained of how the anti-oil critique was disseminated among popular and official audiences. Critical geopolitics theory was used to analyse the Back to Coal Movement's conceptualisations of oil, coal, and Britain's place in the world. Particular attention was paid to the ways in which

geopolitical expressions and imaginations shaped their anti-oil message. The investigation into the Back to Coal Movement reveals that at the local level, the resistance to the use of oil was characterised by deep concerns about the industrial, economic and social consequences of transitioning from a domestic to a foreign fuel. The movement approached the oil issue from a unique local perspective, which was significantly influenced by the social and economic distress occurring in South Wales. The Back to Coal Movement's fundamental assumption was that the Navy had abandoned South Wales for 'foreigners,' and had left Britain vulnerable to social and economic decline and military defeat. To express these concerns, and to increase the visibility of the anti-oil message, the Back to Coal Movement undertook a campaign that pushed for a return to the use of coal in the Navy. To gather popular support for its cause, the movement reframed the oil critique using new metaphors and analogies that drew upon local understandings of resources, geography, and security. The movement's driving message was that the Navy's use of foreign oil jeopardised national security and prosperity, and that it was the duty of loyal British citizens to continue supporting 'our' fuel and 'our' industries, and to continue resisting the Navy's dependence upon 'their' fuel.

Chapter three investigated the ways in which the anti-oil message was received by official and popular audiences over the period 1931-1937. It explored where the anti-oil movement was successful in finding support and where it encountered resistance. It used a critical geopolitics approach to analyse the ways in which official and popular interlocutors reframed the anti-oil message with metaphors and storylines that drew upon

their understandings of the world. The chapter argues that officialdom did not consider the anti-oil movement's concerns about oil to be legitimate: the National Government considered the use of oil a naval issue, rather than a matter of national policy; while the naval community (with few exceptions) was profoundly hostile to the anti-oil movement, perceiving the choice of fuel as a strictly naval matter. The anti-oil movement's popular campaign, however, successfully relayed its message that the Navy's use of oil was a serious national issue demanding public debate. The anti-oil movement's enframing of the oil controversy with the themes of 'us' and 'them,' 'ours' and 'theirs,' and 'here' and 'there' was particularly effective in creating the impression that the Admiralty and National Government were the enemies not only of British coal, but also of Britain itself. When the anti-oil movement began to acquire significant popular support for its campaign, the majority of pro-oil members of the Royal Navy community mobilised and initiated an aggressive attack on the proponents of coal, seeking to silence the movement and to eliminate popular resistance to the use of oil. The investigation into the responses to the anti-oil message clearly shows that Bernard Acworth and the Back to Coal Movement were successful in their primary goals of promoting a popular understanding of the dangers of oil and in questioning the Admiralty's claim to being the only authoritative voice in determining the Navy's fuel policy. The anti-oil movement was unsuccessful in convincing the Admiralty to return to the use of coal, but its campaign was far from futile.

It is hoped that this thesis will encourage further enquiry into the writings and activities of Bernard Acworth, the Back to Coal Movement, and the anti-oil movement in

general. There remain several avenues of investigation that could be pursued in the future. The consequences of the Navy's use of oil during the Second World War, in particular, have been understudied. The loss of British oil tankers to German submarines in the spring of 1942 left the country in a position similar to the one that it faced in the First World War – depleted of oil and short on means of augmenting further supplies. Indeed, the general subject of Allied oil supplies in the Second World War is an interesting story that has yet to be fully told. Acworth's by-election bid at Putney in the spring of 1942 is another event in the history of the anti-oil movement demanding investigation. In this episode, Prime Minister Winston Churchill sought to destroy Acworth's credibility by publishing defamatory materials. Acworth lost the election, but he won a libel case against the *Daily Mail*, which ran an article accusing Acworth of defeatism and that demanded his arrest.³³⁵ There were transition debates in other parts of the British Empire, as well, none of which have been examined. South Africa, Australia, and Canada all had significant coalmining industries during the interwar period, and the *Colliery Guardian's* coverage of these countries suggests that they too experienced industrial, economic, and social problems as a result of the introduction of oil. Finally, the anti-oil movement can be used to inform current debates on energy transitions and their influences on social and technological change. The conclusions reached in this thesis suggest that the ways in which popular conceptions of fuel and security are shaped by interest groups are necessary elements in the study of national energy policies.

³³⁵ "Arrest This Man," *Daily Mail*, 9 February 1942, 1.

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