

# **A DON IN THE BALTIC – 1855**

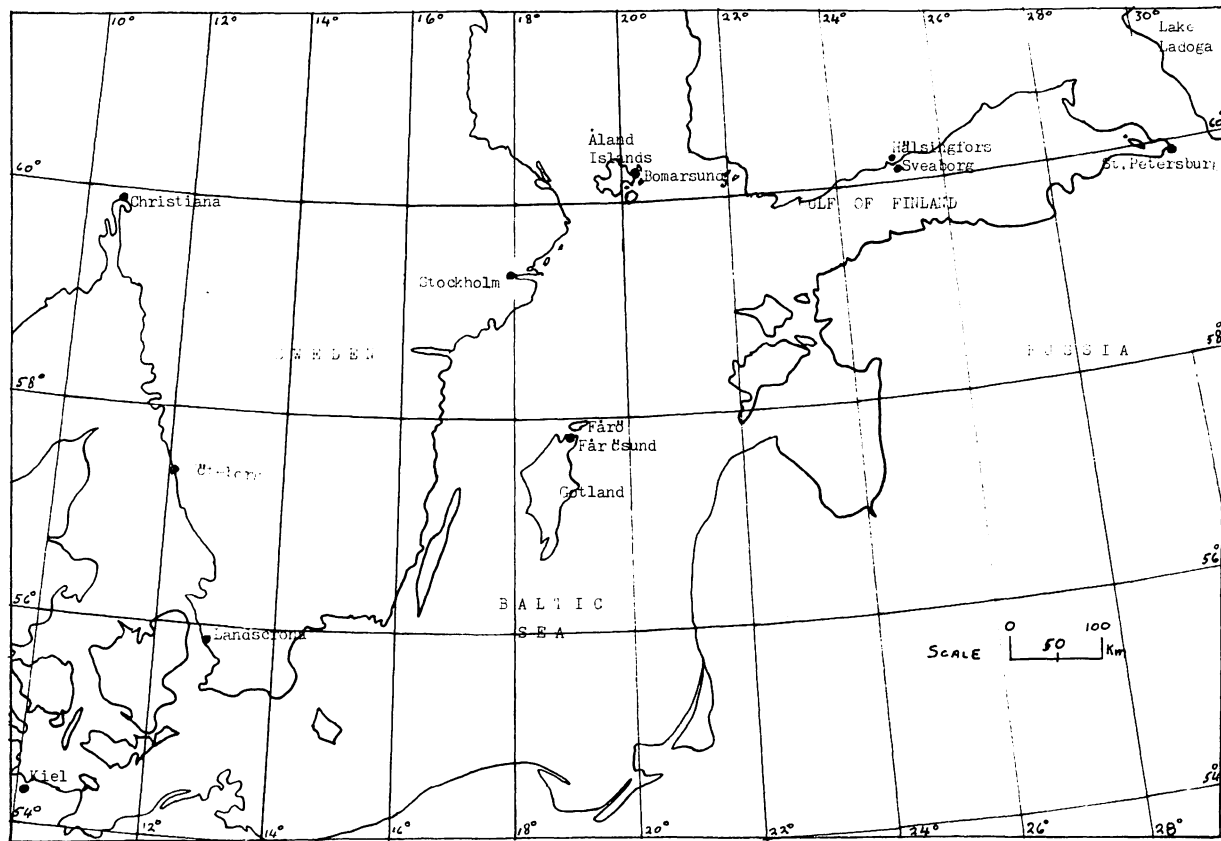
**Ian Keillar**

From the Baltic to the Crimea is over 2,000 versts as the Russian crow flies but almost double that by the route taken by the Vikings who portaged, pillaged and traded their way from Lake Ladoga to the Caspian. Some thousand years after the Vikings exploded out of their homeland and long after their descendents had conquered England, the coincidences of war connected once again the lands first linked by Viking trade routes.

In the early 19th century, Russia, under Tsar Nicholas I, expanded her empire to the east; crushed the Decembrist uprising in St. Petersburg and the Polish revolt in the west. Her western flank reasonably secure, Russia then returned to press on the Muslim states to the south and in particular on Turkey. By mid century, Turkey, long the sick man of Europe, appeared to be dying. The great powers crowded round the bed, shedding crocodile tears; anxious that the patient did not recover and even more anxious to ensure that none, except themselves, made off with the Sultan's silver.

Sick she was, dying not yet, Turkey blundered into naval hostilities with Russia in November 1853. Britain and France, for no higher principle than naked self interest, supported Turkey and drifted into conflict with Russia in March 1854. The catastrophies which followed in the Crimea are well known. The charge of the Light Brigade was only one more noteworthy stupid incident in a campaign notorious for its incompetence and squalor.

Meanwhile, far to the north, combined British and French fleets sailed for the Baltic, the better to attack the enemy closer to his capital, St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, the ports of Chatham, Brest and Portsmouth were somewhat remote from the Gulf of Finland so it was essential that a base be found in the Baltic. Russia controlled the north and east of the Baltic while Sweden controlled the west. Sweden was neutral but although this annoying technicality embarrassed the Allies it did not deter them from establishing a base at Fårösund on the northern tip of the Swedish island of Gotland.



On 9th March 1854 Queen Victoria reviewed her Baltic fleet and some days later after alternately steaming and sailing across the North Sea a gaggle of 17 British ships gathered at Vinga on the 18th of the month. Vinga is an outposted reef of the rocky archipelago which guards the approaches to Göteborg. There the British rendezvoused with the French fleet and the French Admiral persuaded the combined fleets to engage in gunnery practice. This was deplored by at least one senior British officer as a waste of powder and shot. The tactics of Nelson had been to engage the enemy at point blank range and then, relying on the superior skill of the British gunners at rapid fire, blow the enemy out off the water. Ability at long range gunnery was considered effete and cowardly – a prejudice which lingered on disastrously into the 20th century.

The Admiral of the British fleet was Sir Charles Napier. Just as the army relied on officers who had served with Wellington, so did the navy with Nelson. But Nelson's victory was a decade earlier than the Duke's so the navy's top brass was just that bit older. Sir Charles Napier, born near Falkirk, entered the navy at the age of fourteen in 1800 so he was in his late sixties when he raised his standard on the great ship-of-the-line, the "Duke of Wellington".

The Summer of 1854 was disappointing to the Allies in the Baltic. They captured a few blockade runners and, after a tremendous bombardment and, with the aid of 10,000 French troops, the Åland fortress of Bomarsund fell on the 16th of August. In the Autumn the Allies withdrew from the Baltic and the Russians re-advanced into the Åland Islands. With customary brutality they then transported most of the male population to the Russian mainland, as a punishment to the mainly Swedish speaking Finns who had not behaved in a suitably anti-Allied fashion.

During the winter of 1854-55 the fleet was overhauled in home waters and many small craft, such as gun and mortar boats, were hurriedly commissioned. The shortage of medical officers was critical and the Admiralty decided to enlist, on temporary engagements, medical students who would be commissioned as "Assistant Surgeons"; or, as the sailors called them, "Doctor's Mates".

Towards the end of March 1855, over a hundred and fifty third year Edinburgh medical students sat in tiered circles in the surgical theatre looking down on the great Professor James Syme. The professor finished his lecture and then fished from his pocket an imposing letter from the Admiralty stating that forty students were to be given the opportunity to sign on as Assistant Surgeons. The pay was to be 7/6 (37½p) per day; mess in the gunroom and be discharged in time to resume studies next winter.

Amongst the eighty who volunteered and amongst the forty who were recommended was nineteen year old William Gerard Don. Don was a Stracathro loon, educated at Aberdeen before entering Edinburgh University to study medicine. He kept a diary of his Baltic exploits and almost forty years later, in 1894, he published it privately, having it printed in Brechin. The remainder of this article is based mainly on Don's book supplemented by comments from the newspaper "Gotlands Läns Tidning" whose Fårösund correspondent wrote under the sardonic non de plume of "Neutrality".

Times change, but 1855 medical students seemed to be much like the 1985 model, as Don's diary reveals: "When the evening for departure arrived, there was a large muster of friends at the Waverly Station to see us off by the ordinary night train to London. We were a noisy lot, and the usual passengers gave us a wide berth; so that whole compartments were rapidly filled by college chums." ... "During a halt at York we invaded the refreshment rooms like a pack of hungry wolves."

Assistant Surgeon Don was posted to the flagship "Duke of Wellington" and after purchasing uniform and kit etc, he reported for duty on March 31st. "The Duke of Wellington" was a wooden walled three decker with what could only be called an auxiliary steam engine driving a propeller. Designed originally as a sailing ship she was already obsolescent when laid down at Pembroke in 1852 as the "Windsor Castle". During construction the great Duke died and the ship was re-named the "Duke of Wellington" in his honour. At the same time she was lengthened and a steam engine fitted. But naval architecture was changing rapidly and by the time she sailed for the Baltic she was obsolete as wooden walls were no longer capable of

withstanding explosive shells fired from ironclad vessels.

The “Duke of Wellington’s” three fighting decks varied in height from six to seven feet. She carried 131 guns serviced by a crew of 1,200 officers and men. Her length was 270 ft. (82m), beam 20ft. (6m) and depth 60 ft. (18m), draught in salt water 27 ft. (8m). At 3,700 tons she had a peak engine power of 780 horse. Except for the steam engine and the fold-down smoke- stack the ship would have been instantly recognisable and useable by any of Nelson’s captains and crews.

On Wednesday 4th April 1855 the fleet of twenty ships left Spithead, to be augmented from other ports until 100 vessels, ranging from the giant “Duke” to small mortar boats, were heading for the Baltic. The flagship did not get far, for on the first day a Yankee clipper ran her down and the “Duke” had to return to Spithead for repairs. On Monday 16th April the “Duke” set sail again and after six days the ship was off Shetland, her puny engine being incapable of keeping her on course during storm conditions. Three days later the “Duke” joined the rest of the fleet at the then Danish town of Kiel.

The “Duke” flew the flag of Sir Richard Saunders Dundas, born on 11th April 1802 and not to be confused with Sir James Whitley Deans Dundas who first joined the navy on 19th March 1799 and whose actions at Sebastopol in 1855 were much criticised. Sir James bombarded the sea forts guarding Sebastopol for one day and received no credit for his activities. Sir Richard bombarded Sveaborg for over two days and was widely acclaimed. But then, there were independent witnesses at Sebastopol but no nosy newspaper men at Sveaborg. As the canny “Gorlands Läns Tidning” correspondent commented as he reported the glowing English accounts of the bombardment; “We shall soon hear from the Sveaborg trustworthy news.”

Although the collision to the flagship had delayed the fleet this was no real hardship for the ice had not yet broken in the Baltic. As Captain Key of the “Amphion” noted in his diary dated 4th April: “Landsrona; we have been compelled to seek refuge here, as the ice is drifting about in large masses, and the current being so strong, it is unsafe either to anchor or to keep the sea.” A week later he was quite scathing about the neutral harbour he had sought refuge in: “We are

still icebound in this outlandish place.” ... “We hear people are still driving sledges across the Gulf of Finland.”

Eventually the ice melted sufficiently for the armada to advance into the Baltic and on the morning of 6th May, Assistant Surgeon Don heard the anchor chain rattle out off the coast of Gotland at the port of Fårösund. Bum boats were soon swarming around. “A few intensely rustic and Scandinavian women came on board, and in the most comic way drew from beneath the folds of their ample petticoats the live fowls they wished to dispose of. Some of the lusty dames could speak a few words of English, which they had picked up from contact with the ubiquitous British sailor.”

There were other diversions on board. Don witnessed a flogging. “The culprit in this instance was an ordinary seaman convicted of the despicable offence of stealing from comrades. The whole crew – officers and men – were piped to the quarterdeck, and the culprit paraded to hear the charge, conviction and sentence read by the Captain. He was ordered to strip, which he did to the waist. A kerchief was bound round his neck, and, standing face on to the trap ribbing, was tied hands and feet to it, like an extended frog. A sturdy boatswain’s mate then stepped to the front with a cat o’ nine tails, and on signal deliberately delivered twelve lashes, each of which was shouted out and recorded by a ship corporal. He was relieved by another mate; and so only until forty were administered. The culprit was then unbound, his shirt thrown over his shoulders, and taken to the sick bay for treatment. He bore his punishment pluckily, but evidently suffered much. The effect of the lashes were in order as follows:– the first strokes produced red streaks over the back, and made the muscles visibly quiver; fresh welts continued to arise, till at the end of the first dozen the back was a dull red mass) at the eighteenth the skin broke and blood began to trickle down, and so on; when the fortieth was reached the back, from the nape of the neck to the loins, was like a lump of bloody meat.” ... “of all the villainous sights, this is the vilest; yet the terror of the lash prevents an enormous amount of crime on a man o’ war.”

While anchored off Fårö the press was also invited on board and the correspondent for the “Gotlands Läns Tidning” was suitably

impressed. However, he was not entertained in the wardroom and had to be content with the junior officers' company in the gunroom, where he was entertained to port and cakes which explained were small flour breads. He must have filled his notebook with many facts which he faithfully wrote up in his article, noting, for the benefit of his readers, that 100 English feet are equivalent to 102 $\frac{2}{3}$  Swedish ditto. He also noted that their particular host was a: "Norwegian, lieutenant in the English service." He did not give the Norwegian's name but he was most likely to have been "Jim" Crowe, a writer whose mother was Norwegian and whose father had been the British Consul at Christiania (Oslo). "Jim" Crowe looked more Scandinavian than English while his first tongue was his mother's.

Midsummer passed and the nights were starting to draw in when Dundas eventually ordered his fleet to attack the fortress of Sveaborg. Sveaborg comprised a group of islands covering the approaches to Hälsingfors (Helsinki) and had been well fortified by the Russians. What the strategic advantage there would be in attacking this fortress so late in the season is not clear but presumably Dundas wanted to do something before the onset of winter drove the Allied fleets from the Baltic.

It was an impressive British fleet which steamed towards Sveaborg in early August. there were nineteen ships of the line, twenty gunboats, five frigates, ten corvettes, twelve paddle ships, sixteen mortar boats and supply and hospital vessels. The French contingent consisted of three ships of the line with six smaller vessels and a hospital ship. A grand total of 102 ships with 2,218 guns, 20 mortars and 26,500 officers and men prepared to attack the Russian fortress.

In 1855 the fortress extended over seven islands with some casemates cut into the living rock whils others were built of massive granite blocks. There were barracks capable of holding 12,000 men, dockyards, stores, magazines, hospitals, prison and even a gas works. The whole was defended by 800 guns so placed as to give converging fire in every direction open to attack. In 1854, Sir Charles Napier had pronounced Sveaborg impregnable both by sea and by land.

By the 7th August sixty-nine Allied ships were anchored around

the fortress at a range of 4,600 yds. (4,100m). Inside this ring of warships the smaller gunboats and mortar boats buzzed about in circles making themselves very difficult targets to follow and hit. Outside the ring were traders and colliers and even a few British pleasure yachts which had come along to see the fun. At 7.30 a.m. on the morning of 9th August a signal flare went up and 25 mortars flung up their shells to a height of 1,000 ft. (300m). Each shell had a diameter of 13 ins. (0.33m) and a bursting charge of 20 lbs. (9 kgs) of black powder. From their highest elevation they thundered down into the soft centre of the fortification and, on exploding, hurled jagged iron fragments over a wide area. Simultaneously the small gunboats darted in, fired their 68 pounders and then retired to reload.

From the massive forts and granite emplacements every aperture belched fire and shot but the capital ships were prudently almost out of range so the Russian fire was comparatively ineffective. The small mortar and gunboats kept constantly on the move and so were almost impossible to hit by the ponderously slow aiming heavy enemy guns. At 10.30 a.m. a magazine on the island of Vargö was hit and a huge cloud of smoke mushroomed upwards. This was shortly followed by a rolling noise like thunder and a shock wave which so frightened the sight-seers from Hälsingfors that they rushed back to the city. At noon, on Vargön and Gustafsvård, magazine after magazine exploded and stones, guns and men were hurled in the air to descend in a dreadful mixture of metal, rubble and blood. By 4 p.m. there were fires and flames everywhere. At 9 p.m. rocket ships raked the fortress and as the rockets landed at a different angle to the mortar shells and cannon shot, so they started new fires.

The firing continued all night but by the next day the Allied fire slackened off. The mortars were becoming cracked and damaged due to overwork while the crews were also becoming exhausted, many of them suffering from deafness. At about noon on the second day the gas works at West Svartö was hit and one of the storage tanks blew up igniting the dockyards so that vast stacks of timber, tar, pitch and canvas took fire and added their flames and smoke to the general conflagration. As evening fell, West Svartö became wracked by a final explosion and by midnight the island was a continuous sheet of flame. At 3 a.m. on Saturday 11th August the last Allied shell was fired.



The Allied forces suffered no fatal casualties and had only 110 wounded. The Russian dead amounted to some 2,300 which equated no less than one man killed for every ten Allied shells or rockets hurled at the fortress. Despite the casualties there were over 30,000 men at arms still defending Sveaborg and the Allies made no effort to storm the fort. On the 13th the weather broke and the fleet left for Fårösund. By September the fleet was starting to leave the Baltic. From Gotland they retrieved their Russian prisoners from the mill at Bunge and took them away to Portsmouth. On Fårö they left the bodies of those who had died from wounds and disease. They also left a community which had once been desperately poor but which had enjoyed unprecedented prosperity over the past two years – a prosperity so remarkable that the happy remembrance of it lasted in folk memory for over a hundred years.

The war muddled on into 1856. Sweden was persuaded to renounce her neutrality but before this could take effect the war ended by the Treaty of Paris which was as unsatisfactory as the war had been inconclusive. Turkey remained as the sick man of Europe while Russia continued her probing to the east – a probing which continues to this day.

And what of the young Assistant Surgeon William Don? He returned to his studies at Edinburgh University and graduated M.D. in 1857. He joined the army and served in India during the mutiny and eventually retired as Deputy Surgeon-General in 1885. Twice married, he fathered five sons and four daughters, and died, distinguished and respected on 27th July 1920 at his home, 52 Canfield Cardens, West Hampstead.