

2016

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Holger Herwig

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Recommended Citation

Herwig, Holger (2016) "Jutland: Acrimony to Resolution," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 69 : No. 4 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss4/12>

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REVIEW ESSAYS

JUTLAND: ACRIMONY TO RESOLUTION

Holger Herwig

Jutland: The Naval Staff Appreciation, ed. William Schleihauf. Barnsley, U.K.: Seaforth Publishing, 2016. 316 pages. \$34.95.
The Jutland Scandal: The Truth about the First World War's Greatest Sea Battle, by J. E. T. Harper and Sir Reginald Bacon. Barnsley, U.K.: Frontline Books, 2016. 252 pages. \$24.99.
Jutland: The Unfinished Battle, by Nicholas Jellicoe. Barnsley, U.K.: Seaforth Publishing, 2016. 402 pages. \$35.95.

Shortly after 2 PM (GMT) on 31 May 1916 the Danish tramp steamer *N. J. Fjord* blew off steam and came to a halt in the North Sea just west of the Skagerrak, the maritime strait between Denmark and Norway. To the northwest, its captain spied the British light cruiser HMS *Galatea*; to the southeast, the German light cruiser SMS *Elbing*. Thus was established the first contact in what the British would call the battle of Jutland, and the Germans *die Schlacht vor dem Skagerrak*: 151 ships of 1,700 guns and 60,000 sailors under the command of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, and 100 ships of 900 guns and 45,000 sailors under the command of Vice Admiral Reinhard Scheer. In the ensuing twelve hours, there took place several battles: the initial battle cruiser engagement; the British Battle Cruiser Fleet's "run to the north"; two main fleet engagements; and finally several violent and confused night actions by light cruisers and destroyers. About 6,800 British and 3,000 German sailors died or were wounded. The Royal Navy lost three battle cruisers, three armored cruisers, and eight destroyers of 115,025 tons; the High Sea Fleet, one battle cruiser, one predreadnought, four light cruisers, and five destroyers of 61,180 tons.

Holger H. Herwig is professor emeritus at the University of Calgary.

Naval War College Review, Autumn 2016, Vol. 69, No. 4

Conventional wisdom has it that the battle was a German tactical victory but a British strategic victory. There should have been little controversy about the only great sea battle of World War I, but controversy there was. Roughly 458,000 Google hits for the entry “battle of Jutland” attest to the ferocity of the “real war” waged, especially in Britain in the 1920s between the supporters of Admiral Jellicoe, commander in chief of the Grand Fleet, and Vice Admiral Sir David Beatty, commander of the British Battle Cruiser Fleet. The four books in the three volumes under review will give the reader an appreciation of that acrimony—and, it is hoped, offer resolution.

Why was Jutland not a second Glorious First of June 1794? The nation demanded an answer—but it got none. In fact, the Germans won the opening round in the public relations campaign over Jutland when its admiralty staff, on the morning of 1 June 1916, issued a formal press communiqué listing the heavy British losses while downplaying their own. A terse British Admiralty statement, which hit the newspapers on 3 June 1916, seemed merely to confirm the German accounts of the battle. The “magic of Trafalgar [1805],” Kaiser Wilhelm II crowed, “has been broken.”

To mitigate the continuing public relations disaster, in January 1919 the first sea lord, Rosslyn Wemyss, appointed Captain John Harper to “prepare a record” of “what actually happened in the battle.” Harper and his team worked fast, completing their report early in October of that year. It was cold, clinical—and devastating. Beatty, having been promoted to full admiral and appointed Wemyss’s successor, was livid. The “Harper Record” threatened to tarnish Beatty’s public image as the hero of the battle of Jutland. For, in the first phase of the battle, Harper noted, it was “extremely unpalatable” that Beatty with a force of four battleships and six battle cruisers “failed to defeat a weaker enemy who made no effort to avoid action” (Vice Admiral Franz von Hipper’s five German battle cruisers), “but in the space of 50 minutes, suffered what can only be described as a partial defeat.” Moreover, Harper charged that Beatty on HMS *Lion* repeatedly had kept Jellicoe on HMS *Iron Duke* ignorant of the enemy’s position, that when closing up with the Grand Fleet his battle cruisers “puzzlingly” had performed a complete circular turn, and that Beatty’s signaling during the battle had been abysmal. Unsurprisingly, the new first sea lord made certain the “Harper Record” never saw the light of day; it was consigned to the shelves of the British Library archives.

Still, not even David Beatty could kill the nation’s interest in Jutland. In November 1920, as pressure from within the service mounted to set the Jutland record straight, the first sea lord asked Captains Alfred and Kenneth Dewar, both strong supporters, to write up a staff appreciation of the battle of Jutland. In 1922,

the Dewars published the *Naval Staff Appreciation*—the most “grotesque account of the battle,” in the words of official historian Sir Julian Corbett (*History of the Great War, Naval Operations*, vol. 3).

Beatty was the hero; Jellicoe was the villain. With regard to the first phase of the battle, the Dewars laid the blame for the ten-mile separation between the Battle Cruiser Fleet and the 5th Battle Squadron squarely on the latter’s commander, Rear Admiral Hugh Evan-Thomas, for having failed to follow Beatty’s signal to close up. They declined, however, to mention that Beatty had failed to signal Evan-Thomas by searchlight after wind and smoke had obscured flag signals. Nor did they mention that faulty signaling resulted in a mistaken distribution of fire, leaving SMS *Derfflinger* undisturbed. Again, there was no mention of Beatty’s steaming in a complete circle with *Lion*, *Princess Royal*, *Tiger*, and *New Zealand* after the “run to the north”; nor of his failure to communicate the whereabouts of Scheer’s Main Fleet between 5 and 5:30 PM. Front and center, on the other hand, was the Dewars’ criticism of Jellicoe’s decision to deploy on his port wing (to the south) at 6:54 PM, which, in their view, moved him away from the guns of the High Sea Fleet and denied him a “second Trafalgar.” In fact, the deployment on a southeast-by-east course put Jellicoe between Scheer and his bases, gave the gunners of the Grand Fleet the best light, and exposed the High Sea Fleet to the fire of the maximum number of British ships.

Perhaps the most mischievous statements in the *Naval Staff Appreciation* were that the Grand Fleet “was only occasionally in action,” that its actual firing was “confined to two intervals of about [a] quarter of an hour each,” and that after Scheer’s brilliant “battle turn away” to the west, “no attempt was made to follow” on Jellicoe’s part. The “idea of attack was lacking.” This smacked of incompetence, if not downright cowardice. Finally, the Dewars detected the Nelsonian touch in Beatty’s dramatic signal at 7:47 PM, “Submit that the van of the battleships follow me; we can then cut off the whole of the enemy fleet.” Seeing that “alone and unsupported he could not engage the whole of Scheer’s Battle Fleet,” Beatty had called on Jellicoe finally to join the fight. Instead, the commander in chief had altered course “two points away from the enemy.” After the High Sea Fleet had swept safely across the stern of the Grand Fleet during the night, the latter returned home “with two killed and five wounded. It had never been seriously in action.”

Rubbish. John Jellicoe’s Grand Fleet at Jutland fired 1,539 shells from the main batteries, scoring 57 hits; David Beatty’s Battle Cruiser Fleet loosed 1,469 shells for 21 hits. Put differently, the battleships were the source of 35 percent of the heavy-caliber gunfire and scored 46 percent of the hits the British fleet obtained.

But in critiquing the Royal Navy’s hallowed single-line deployment and the embodying doctrine of centralized command, the Dewars had gone too far:

Beatty immediately called back all copies of the book, and in 1928 his successor, Admiral Charles Madden, ordered all copies destroyed. Four survived, and they formed the basis for William Schleihauf's critical and annotated 2016 reprint of *Jutland: The Naval Staff Appreciation*.

Nonetheless, the Dewars' damning indictments were taken up quickly by public writers. First off, in 1923 Winston Churchill took up the cause in *The World Crisis*, volume 3, 1916–1918. Recognizing that he had “only the vaguest idea of what had taken place” at Jutland, the former first lord of the Admiralty called on David Beatty for assistance. The first sea lord could help: he recommended none other than Kenneth Dewar! The result was predictable: Churchill's graphic prose and Dewar's mean-spirited attack on Jellicoe. The latter had been obsessed with the system of centralized command. He had shackled his commanders. He had refused to show initiative. He had possessed a “defensive habit of mind.” He had been “ponderous.” He had clung to the old single-line formation. Churchill's oft-repeated comment that Jellicoe was the only man who could have lost the war in an afternoon was not meant as praise; its corollary was that Jellicoe was the only man who could have *won* the war in an afternoon.

Churchill was not regarded as a true “navy man,” and hence his *World Crisis* treatment of Jutland caused only a minor uproar among Jellicoe's supporters. The same could not be said of Filson Young, the author of a glowing 1921 account of Beatty entitled *With the Battle Cruisers*. In the *Sunday Express* in 1924 and in the *Daily Express* in 1925 Young published articles in which he claimed that Admiral Scheer in an interview in effect had confessed “how I escaped at Jutland.” Scheer, of course, was furious. But Young went on to state that, in Scheer's view, Jellicoe, with his cautious approach to the battle, had squandered a perfect opportunity to annihilate the High Sea Fleet. It was now Jellicoe's turn to be furious. All this was but the prelude to two knights in shining armor riding to Jellicoe's defense: Rear Admiral John Harper and Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon.

Livid at Young's treatment of Jellicoe, Harper in 1927 dusted off his unpublished and virtually banned “Harper Record” and published it as *The Truth about Jutland*. It has been reprinted in *The Jutland Scandal* (2016), with only minor editorial corrections. Harper, no longer bound by Admiralty oversight, gave full vent to his deepest emotions. Beatty, the putative hero of Jutland, was unmasked. In the first phase of the battle, he had made the initial “fatal and elementary mistake of dividing his forces.” Moreover, by stationing *Barham* five miles distant, Evan-Thomas could not read Beatty's flag signals, with the result that the 5th Battle Squadron was soon some ten miles distant. This, and this alone, Harper argued, had brought about the loss of the battle cruisers *Indefatigable* and *Queen Mary*. As well, Beatty had failed in his primary role: reconnaissance. Jellicoe was reduced to visual signals: “Where is enemy's battle fleet?” With the two fleets closing at

thirty-five to forty miles per hour, time was critical; yet one hour passed without Beatty sighting Hipper's battle cruisers. And hours passed before Beatty informed his commander in chief of the critical losses to his Battle Cruiser Fleet. Harper's final verdict was damning: "Beatty did not maintain contact with the enemy, he lost touch shortly after his turn to the northward, and sent no reports to Jellicoe during the time when accurate information would have been of inestimable value to him." To those in the service who had read the internal "Harper Record," only the harsh tone of *The Truth about Jutland* came as a surprise.

The same could not be said about a second defense of Jellicoe in the face of the Churchill/Young attacks: Admiral Bacon's *The Jutland Scandal*, first published in 1925. It also is included in the 2016 reprint, *The Jutland Scandal*. Like Harper, Bacon sharply criticized Beatty for dividing his forces at the start of the battle, for not closing up with the 5th Battle Squadron sooner, for not keeping Jellicoe informed about the location of Scheer's High Sea Fleet, and for steaming 360 degrees around the Main Fleet after his "run to the north." But Bacon saved his most savage attack for Vice Admiral Beatty's signal at 7:50 PM for Jellicoe's battleships to follow his battle cruisers and "cut off the whole" of Vice Admiral Scheer's battle fleet. "As a matter of fact," Bacon acidly remarked, "there was nothing from which the battle cruisers could cut the German battle fleet off! They had already been cut off from their harbours."

It came as no surprise that First Sea Lord Beatty was annoyed by "that bloody Bacon book," and that it had only added to his "despondency" concerning his waning influence with the government and the navy. Churchill, likely embarrassed by his amateur treatment of the battle of Jutland in *The World Crisis*, in February 1940 vetoed the Royal Navy's suggestion to name its new *King George V*-class battleships *Jellicoe* and *Beatty*.

It now has been one hundred years since the battle of Jutland. Beatty and Jellicoe both rest in the crypt of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. Armies of naval historians have dissected every aspect of the battle, and have come up with intriguing names such as "Flawed Victory," "Distant Victory," "Jutland Scandal," "The Riddle of Jutland," "The Truth about Jutland," "The Jutland Epic," "The Blindfold Game," "The Rules of the Game," "The Smoke Screen of Jutland," "Sins of Omission and Commission," and "Our Bloody Ships or Our Bloody System," among countless others.

Thankfully, we now have a superb analysis, *Jutland: The Unfinished Battle* (2016), from Nicholas Jellicoe—the admiral's grandson. This source at first sight might seem to be prejudiced, but that is not the case. Obviously aware of the possible suspicion of bias because of his last name, Nicholas Jellicoe has gone out of his way to offer both the general reader and the naval expert a balanced,

measured, and yet nuanced account of the greatest sea battle of World War I. He weighs and measures. He offers conflicting accounts and interpretations. He evaluates sources. He compares British and German eyewitness and official accounts and statistics. He judiciously examines the accounts by John Harper, Reginald Bacon, and the Admiralty discussed above. And then he offers his own best opinion. Along the way, he provides the layman with text boxes and sidebars to explain the complex naval systems in place at Jutland, and he further includes countless diagrams to explain ship locations and movements.

Nicholas Jellicoe apportions praise and criticism in equal amounts. Tactically, Jutland was a German victory and a “bad blow” for both the Royal Navy and the nation. Hipper’s leadership of the German battle cruisers had been “brilliant,” Scheer’s two “battle turns away” and his ultimate escape “remarkable.” German signals and communications had been “exemplary,” those of the British “lamentable.” Jellicoe’s system of command had been rigid, a “vestige of the Victorian past.” Beatty’s reconnaissance and reporting had been a “failure.” Beatty’s obsession with rapid firing and the resulting storage of cordite next to the gun turrets, rather than improper flash protection, had caused the loss of the battle cruisers. The role of the new weapons of the day—mines, torpedoes, and aircraft—had been overrated before the battle, and negligible in its outcome. Both navies had fought the battle unexpectedly and discovered it to be highly complex, and had fought under difficult conditions of wind, rain, smoke, heavy seas, and fading light. Both sides regarded it as an “unfinished battle.”

Strategically, Nicholas Jellicoe joins the bevy of historians who have argued that Jutland was a British victory. “The issue at stake,” he writes, “had been sea power.” One side exercised it; the other sought to gain it. Afterward, the arteries of seaborne commerce, Alfred Thayer Mahan’s maritime highways, remained open to Britain and closed to Germany. Reinhard Scheer, the putative “victor of the Skagerrak,” accepted this reality when, in his after-action report of 4 July 1916 to Wilhelm II, he forsook future “Jutlands” in favor of “the defeat of British economic life” by way of unrestricted submarine warfare “against British trade.” The High Sea Fleet, in Churchill’s stinging remark of February 1912, indeed had been but a “luxury” fleet.