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The Late Victorian Navy: The Pre-dreadnought Era and the Origins of the First World War

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that his fleet was so powerful that he could divide it and still sustain local superiority. However, because Mahan never considered a situation such as this, one must judge him inadequate as a guide in the last year of the great Pacific War.

“No plan survives first major contact with the enemy,” wrote Helmut von Moltke the Elder, chief of the German General Staff in the mid-nineteenth century. If this be true of plans, which are far less abstract than theories, should one expect that Mahan provides adequate direction through all the contingencies that a warrior might face?

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Parkinson, Roger. *The Late Victorian Navy: The Pre-dreadnought Era and the Origins of the First World War*. New York: Boydell, 2008. 323pp. \$145

Roger Parkinson's study of the Royal Navy from 1878 to the 1890s provides a useful overview of a period in British naval history that is sometimes seen as a neglected "Dark Age." He takes issue with the standard work of the period, Arthur Marder's first book, *British Naval Policy, 1880–1905: The Anatomy of British Sea-Power* (1940). In this published version of his University of Exeter doctoral thesis completed under Dr. Michael Duffy, Parkinson expands on the insights of Oscar Parkes, Bryan Ranft, Donald M. Schurman, Paul M. Kennedy, N. A. M. Rodger, Jon T. Sumida, and John Beeler with his own detailed research work in parliamentary papers, the Admiralty and Cabinet

Office files at the National Archives, Kew, and the private papers of Lord Salisbury, Britain's prime minister in 1885, 1886–92, 1895–1902, at Hatfield House.

Parkinson's central focus is on the background and the effect of Britain's Naval Defence Act of 1889 in the period that has come to be called—and even dismissed as—the “pre-*Dreadnought*” era. He is reported to be preparing a follow-up work that will focus on the era of HMS *Dreadnought* from 1906 onward. In the volume at hand, Parkinson argues that most historians of the period have accepted too easily Arthur Marder's picture of Britain's relative naval weakness in comparison with other European naval powers. In particular, Parkinson shows that Britain was not by any means a weak naval power and that W. T. Stead's famous articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 1884 were based on a gross exaggeration of the actual state of affairs. The key consideration, he points out, was maintaining a naval force that was equal to that of the next two largest naval powers, France and Russia. The effort to maintain that margin of supremacy in terms of naval expenditures, tonnage, and warship numbers resulted in the Naval Defense Act in 1889. Parkinson maintains this was the spark that ignited the naval race that lasted until the Washington naval arms-limitation treaty of 1922. As a result, Britain's strategic situation changed from one that was a relatively stable balance between Britain facing France and Russia up to the 1880s to one of the late 1890s and early twentieth century that became a “strategic melting pot with not three but eight major naval powers—Britain, France, Russia, America, Germany, Japan, Italy,

and Austria-Hungary.” The instigation of this naval arms race, Parkinson concludes, was the consistent overreaction in Britain that resulted in the 1889 Naval Act due to the influence on naval policy and strategy by the Royal Navy’s “Young Turks” and panic mongers—W. H. Hall, C. C. P. Fitzgerald, and Lord Charles Beresford, abetted by leading writers like the Colomb brothers and the historian John Knox Laughton, all of whom were encouraged by older admirals such as Admiral of the Fleet Sir Thomas Symonds and Sir Geoffrey Phipps-Hornby.

In reaching these conclusions, Parkinson makes a useful contribution to scholarship, and his original research in

British archives clearly sets his work in the context of recent writings by other scholars of British naval history on this period. The weakness of his work lies in his complete reliance on older, and often outdated, secondary works for his chapter sections on competing navies, such as the U.S. Navy, and the presence in his sources of little, if anything, that is not English on the Latin American navies or on those of France, Germany, and Russia. While readers may lament these weaknesses, Parkinson’s book is, nevertheless, an important and stimulating contribution to the history of the late Victorian navy.

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