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Educating the Royal Navy: Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Education for Officers

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In “The Future: The Past as Prologue,” Holloway concludes with an overview of recent naval trends and with his carefully considered views on the present and future role for aircraft carriers. In short, Holloway’s combination of memoir and history with an explanation of his professional judgments makes this a book that deserves to be read widely, by people both inside and outside the U.S. Navy.

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Dickinson, H. W. *Educating the Royal Navy: Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Education for Officers*. New York: Routledge, 2007. 258pp. \$125

From time to time every reader experiences the peculiar delight of discovering a fascinating gem of a book lurking behind an unremarkable cover and prosaic title. While not for the casual reader, *Educating the Royal Navy* is just such a find for those with an interest in the profession of arms at sea. The author, Harry Dickinson of King’s College London, has done masterful work at charting the surprisingly convoluted and highly politicized course of educating the men who led what was at the time the world’s greatest navy. His book is well worth reading.

Dickinson dispels many casually held beliefs concerning Britain’s senior service and its officer corps. For example, the vaunted lieutenant’s exam, established by Samuel Pepys and later enshrined in C. S. Forester’s *Hornblower* series, was not a uniformly applied rigorous test of an officer’s professional skill and knowledge but a most uneven

event that at times entered the realm of the absurd. He also makes clear that patronage and classism were as rampant in the British naval officer corps as in its army equivalent. Correcting the historical record is just one of the book’s contributions to the field.

Dickinson focuses on a major theme in each chapter, while maintaining a more or less chronological approach. The first theme of note is the British attempt to determine if it was more beneficial to train officers ashore or afloat and, if afloat, whether on board dedicated training ships or on vessels sailing on active service.

Another theme concerns the men who did the actual educating. Dickinson fully describes how shortcomings in the naval education system led to professional “tutors” who used “cramming” as a means of getting officers to pass required exams, which did little or nothing to help those officers retain their temporarily gained knowledge or deepen the intellectual capital of the service.

Dickinson, who has taught at the Royal Navy colleges of Greenwich and Dartmouth and at the U.S. Naval Academy, does not shy away from comparing British educational efforts to those of Britain’s rivals. He concludes that the Royal Navy lagged badly behind those other naval powers, including Germany. Dickinson also admits that the Americans developed a “genuine naval war college” well in advance of their British cousins.

Dickinson’s book is so interesting that one wishes he had specifically examined the impact of the Royal Navy’s unquestionably successful seagoing performance and of the complacency that

success may have created in naval leaders of the day when it came to efforts to change the service's professional education. While there were occasionally spectacular failures, such as the *Camperdown/Victoria* collision of 1893, British naval officers could invoke the contemporary equivalent of "if it's not broke, don't fix it" as justification for leaving educational structures intact.

It is also important to note that while Dickinson's history is deeply rewarding, *Educating the Royal Navy* illuminates military educational issues and questions that remain to the current day. How do military education systems adapt themselves to emerging political and technological needs? To what degree should seafaring practicality drive naval education? Can officers acquire more than a practical education at sea?

Is time at sea more important to an officer's education and eventual contribution to the service and nation than attending follow-on schooling assignments ashore? Do navies operate in such demanding environments and possess such unique cultures that officers must be captured at an early age if naval life is ever to seem both reasonable and natural to them? How much education can a resource-constrained navy afford? What is the proper blend of theoretical and applied knowledge? Dickinson, as is appropriate, does not take a side when identifying these questions, but he reminds us they remain to be answered for every generation of sailors.

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