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Bell, Christopher M., *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000. 232pp. $51

Stephen Roskill's two-volume *Naval Policy between the Wars* (London: Collins, 1968 and 1976) has dominated the history of Britain's interwar navy. Roskill—author of the official British naval history of World War II—had a vast store of knowledge, as well as personal experience and contacts with many of the individuals about whom he wrote. However, it is now well over a generation since his volumes were published, and it was inevitable that over time more and different questions would be asked, new material would be uncovered, and existing material would be reconsidered, until even the finest scholarly work would become subject to modification. Consequently, Christopher M. Bell's new history of the Royal Navy between the First and Second World Wars is of considerable interest, though Roskill's work remains the basic reference.

The "silent service" emerged from World War I with great, though aging, materiel strength and in certain fields, such as naval aviation, a significant technological lead. That preeminent position quickly eroded (the lead in naval aviation disappeared, never to be regained), and by the late 1930s the Royal Navy had to determine how to address the difficult problems of a resurgent Germany, an expansionist Japan, and responsibilities in both European and Far Eastern waters—problems compounded especially after 1935, when the Mediterranean could no longer be considered secure.

Bell is currently a research analyst for the Center for Naval Warfare Studies at the Naval War College. He establishes his aims in a clearly written introduction: "This book identifies and analyzes the central body of ideas which guided navy policy-makers during the interwar period, and explores how these ideas influenced Britain's naval and strategic policies. Here it will be applied principally to the naval profession, a group which is often thought to have held no important ideas of its own, but which did in fact possess distinct views about the nature and application of seapower."

Paul Halpern has been a professor of history at Florida State University since 1965. His books include: The Mediterranean Naval Situation, *1908–1914 (Harvard Univ. Press, 1971);* The Naval War in the Mediterranean, 1914–1918 *(Naval Institute Press, 1987); and* A Naval History of World War I *(Naval Institute Press, 1995). He is currently working on a study of the Mediterranean naval situation in the interwar period, as well as on a shorter work on the action in the Otranto Straits in May 1917.*

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In his first chapter, "The Politics of Seapower: The 'One-Power Standard' and British Maritime Security," Bell examines the question of "naval standards," which were subject to change and which he considers "little more than a bargaining tool." "Only by viewing them from this perspective is it possible to understand how the navy attempted to secure the resources it needed."

Bell relies heavily on Admiralty war plans and strategic appreciations to show what British naval leaders thought seapower might accomplish in future conflicts. The titles of the relevant chapters give a good indication of their content: "'Main Fleet to Bermuda': Naval Strategy for an Anglo-American War," "Far Eastern War Plans and the Myth of the Singapore Strategy," "'The Ultimate Potential Enemy': Nazi Germany and British Defense Dilemmas," and "The Search for the 'Knockout Blow': War Plans against Italy."

The idea of potential war with the United States makes odd reading now, but Bell draws an interesting link between this contingency and the possibility of war with Japan. The Admiralty realized that "if British seapower alone could not hope to defeat decisively a major non-European naval power, then war with that power would have to be avoided at almost any cost. This proved to be a sound appreciation, and one which was based on a clear understanding of the limitations of seapower." As for the "Singapore strategy," Bell derides haphazard use of the term. He points out that there were actually several "Singapore strategies," and that the dispatch of a fleet to Singapore was not an end in itself but rather only the opening move in "a prolonged war of attrition." Bell concludes that the Far Eastern plans were not based on obsolete thinking but that the navy planners had to struggle with inadequate means to preserve British interests. "In the end, they failed to preserve all of these interests, but the explanation lies in the magnitude of the threat facing Britain in 1941 rather than in any fundamental errors in the navy's strategic planning."

Bell also gives credit to the Admiralty's planning for a war against Germany. He believes insufficient attention was given to the problem of antisubmarine warfare but considers the British strategic defensive strategy—similar to that which it had adopted in World War I—sound during the first eight months of the war, until the fall of France undermined existing assumptions and created a new and grave situation.

Bell has an interesting chapter on the navy's effort to help British industry. It is appropriately titled "'Showing the Flag': Deterrence and the Naval Armaments Industry." Even though the results of the program were not up to expectations, Bell argues, they were not misguided and cost little. He is more critical in his chapter on naval propaganda. The title is most expressive: "'Something Very Sordid': Naval Propaganda and the British Public." The navy's aversion to "self-promotion" may have diminished during the course of the interwar period,

but it was still strong enough nearly to cause the loss of what Bell calls the battle for the "hearts and minds" of the British public. He concludes that given "the service's declining popularity, . . . if the Second World War had not broken out when it did, the navy would have been in a difficult position to withstand Treasury attacks when the debate over naval expansion was resumed."

Bell's overall conclusions, however, remain positive. While not understating flaws and mistakes, which are fully analyzed in the text, Bell believes that the Admiralty was "largely powerless to prevent the government undermining the foundations of British seapower after the First World War." But this was not due to bad advice from the Admiralty. Had the government in the period between 1921 and 1934 listened more carefully to the navy's pleadings, it could have averted the decline and greatly strengthened Britain's strategic and diplomatic position in the following decade. Bell's final assessment is well put: "The navy did make many mistakes of its own, both before and during the Second World War, but few of its failures were the result of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and application of seapower."

To appreciate fully the quality and sophistication of Bell's analysis, one must read the book. The text is solidly based on Admiralty records in the Public Record Office, Kew. It is clearly written, and even those who are primarily interested in the U.S. Navy will find it accessible and useful for comparison with the American experience during this era. Those interested in the Royal Navy will find Bell's study indispensable.

Luce Hall, c. 1938. Recruits of the Naval Training Station (housed in what is now Sims Hall) are pitching tents on Dewey Field.