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Thomas ap Catesby Jones: Commodore of Manifest Destiny

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principal ideas currently in print in the United States. Equally riveting to anyone formulating realistic strategy is Corbett’s disenchantment with supposedly “decisive” grand battles, his concept of geographically shifting and limited command of the seas, and his praise for interservice cooperation and amphibious operations. He was the first English-speaking writer indissolubly to link the military-naval, diplomatic, and economic elements of strategy.

As Jablonsky notes, Captain A. T. Mahan’s scope is narrower than Corbett’s. The American naval officer was writing in 1890 to further the technological and strategic revolution unleashed by the recent advent of the steam-driven, heavily gunned, thickly armored battleship. Jablonsky reprints only the first sections of Mahan’s opus, those in which Mahan makes his “political-economic argument for sea power.” The editor has omitted entirely the great bulk of the book, the thirteen historical chapters concerning both grand strategy and “the art and science of command,” as derived from Anglo-French naval battles in the age of square-rigged ships of the line. This is a regrettable exclusion, because Jablonsky has adopted and emphasized the imaginative thesis of Jon Tetsuro Sumida that Mahan was as interested in “teaching command” as in the strategy of sea power. The limited excerpt from The Influence of Sea Power is insufficient to permit the reader to judge the validity of Sumida’s proposition or to assess the utility of Mahan’s ponderous dissections of sea battles, which were fought with a technology that had already disappeared when the naval officer wrote more than a century ago.

Half a loaf is nonetheless better than none, and Jablonsky’s balanced arrangement of Corbett, Douhet, and Mitchell alongside Mahan should earn this volume a place on the bookshelves of all students of strategy who are sated with the current deification of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu.

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Smith, Gene A. Thomas ap Catesby Jones: Commodore of Manifest Destiny. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2000. 223pp. $34.95

Thomas ap Catesby Jones is best known for his mistaken seizure of Monterey, California, on 20 October 1842, believing that the United States and Mexico had gone to war. The occupation lasted barely overnight before the American flag had to be ceremoniously lowered and the Mexican flag rehoisted. Locally, the event was an occasion for many banquets and dances, but on the national level more serious repercussions caused a crisis in relations between Mexico and the United States.

Living in Monterey, I had often wondered about this incident, which is mentioned only briefly as a footnote in local histories. Now, with this biography of Thomas ap Catesby Jones, I have a much better understanding of a colorful part of Monterey history.

But this book offers much more. It explores the life of a controversial and complicated man whose naval career lasted half a century, from 1805 to 1855. In this period the United States went through a transformation from a young coastal nation on the Atlantic seaboard to a power that spanned the continent, a nation pursuing a “Manifest Destiny,” with interests stretching well beyond its borders.
While Jones made no truly significant, long-lasting contribution to the U.S. Navy, his career personified the times. He was a contemporary of better-known Isaac Hull, Oliver Hazard Perry, Matthew F. Maury, and John Dahlgren, and like them he contributed to the evolution of the American navy. He was a hero of the War of 1812, introduced innovations as an inspector and superintendent of ordnance, carried the Stars and Stripes to Hawaii in the 1820s, and helped to incorporate California into the United States. Yet Jones was not an atypical commander of his day; he was a striking personality in an age in which individual temperaments helped shape the Navy.

Gene A. Smith does a masterful job in chronicling the life of Thomas ap Catesby Jones, from his appointment as a midshipman in 1805 to his court-martial in 1850 on charges that included fraud against the United States, libel, neglect of duty, and oppression. The court found him guilty and suspended him for five years. Today’s standards for court-martial were not applied to the Jones case; it is doubtful that due process and rules of evidence were followed. Attitudes about naval discipline were changing, but unfortunately, Jones had not changed with them. He was probably convicted because of his past behavior as an old-fashioned tyrant, making him a useful example with which to enforce new attitudes concerning shipboard discipline. Richard Henry Dana’s Two Years before the Mast and Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, among others, had so changed public perception that attitudes such as those of Jones were no longer acceptable. In a sense, one might liken the 1840s and 1850s to the 1980s and 1990s, where attitudes of acceptable behavior changed, and those who did not change along with them eventually paid the consequences. The earlier era dealt with naval disciplinary methods such as flogging, while the more recent attitude change concerned male behavior and sexual harassment.

Although the book is well researched and documented, it may be somewhat difficult to follow for those unfamiliar with the geography. For example, the actions of Jones in the War of 1812 and around New Orleans and the Hawaiian Islands in the 1820s would have been easier to follow if maps had been provided. I could easily follow the discussion concerning Monterey and California only because I live there.

Beyond the life of Jones, the book describes well the mores, attitudes, and practices of the era. For example, career patterns of naval officers; the relationship between private, financial, and military affairs; ambivalence toward slavery; the chaos created by the California gold rush; and many other apparently disconnected topics are presented in a natural and informative manner.

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“Maritime supremacy is the key which unlocks most, if not all, large questions of modern history, certainly the puzzle of how and why we—the Western democracies—are as we are. We are the heirs of maritime supremacy.” So begins the argument of naval historian Peter Padfield’s latest work. Like Nelson, Padfield is prone to bold acts, and in this