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Seapower: Theory and Practice

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

“Navies of the Past, Present, and Future”

Till, Geoffrey, ed. *Seapower: Theory and Practice*. Portland, Oregon: International Specialized Book Services, 1994. 206pp. \$35

THIS IS A USEFUL OVERVIEW of the complex field of international seapower and the interrelationship of theory and practice. Skillfully edited by the well known strategist Geoffrey Till of the Royal Naval College in Greenwich, England, this collection of illuminating essays focuses on two salient issues: the appropriate relationship of seapower and landpower, and the connection between naval theory and practice.

Both issues have largely dominated the discussion of naval power in the modern era, beginning with Alfred Thayer Mahan’s influential theories on the importance of seapower around the turn of the century, and extending through the current debate over littoral warfare as a key operational determinant of and fundamental justification for continued seapower.

The first, and most academic, essay in the collection is Colin Gray’s study of history and strategic theory, which he contends “cooperate to mutual advantage.” Gray, a brilliant strategic thinker, sharply connects the intellectual requirement for both continued examination of maritime studies and the dramatic real-world requirement for continued power at sea. In his well written essay “History for Strategists” Gray extols the virtues of the British strategic maritime experience as a valuable example for current thinkers.

Jan Breemer contributes an interesting essay, “The Burden of Trafalgar” (previously published as Newport Paper Number 6 by the Naval War College Press), which uses the influence of the Battle of Trafalgar as an example of how history (and the ancillary strategic analysis that inevitably accompanies it) becomes the driving

force in decisions. This may not always be helpful, as his title implies, and his analysis supports this conclusion. Breemer says that both the “British and German navies went to war in 1914 burdened by the legacy of Trafalgar,” the British endlessly searching for the great decisive battle and the Germans seeking “prestige”—something unattainable without a far longer maritime history.

Three of the essays in the collection are focused at the level of operational art and will be of greatest interest to currently serving naval officers. Notable among them is Andrew Gordon’s description of the concern British planners had in the early twentieth century concerning the Japanese threat. It breaks step with the more traditional analysis that places the German threat at the head of the British planning queue. Gordon states that “strategically speaking, the British Empire was a throw-back from the uncrowded age of Pax Britannica. From the turn of the century, if Britain was to be secure at home, a formal naval alliance was required.”

A second operationally informed discussion is Andrew Lambert’s “Seapower 1939–1940,” which keys on strategic decisions taken in the opening months of the Second World War. Imbued with his experiences in World War I, Churchill overstated the impact that seapower could have in the initial stages of the new conflict. This interesting contribution demonstrates how difficult it can be to apply lessons directly from one scenario to the next.

Finally, Jock Gardner’s “The Battle of the Atlantic, 1941: The First Turning Point?” lays out a coherent argument that when war actually begins, the hard data of combat (sinking rates, locations, convoy timing issues) overtakes theoretical strategic planning. No surprise here, but one can think of such examples as Vietnam where the process of the practical overtaking the theoretical was a long one indeed.

The final essays cover the post–World War II era, and John Pay’s piece on carrier operations illustrates how a navy’s self-conceived notion of its operational approach will drive its procurement and design decisions. This is perhaps the most concrete example of how steel is cut on the basis of strategic theory. Turning to the post–Cold War era, Norwegian Commodore Jacob Borresen captures the current trend in strategic thinking that focuses on battle to influence events ashore and the concurrent requirement to dominate the littorals “from the sea.”

Editor Geoffrey Till returns to conclude the collection with an essay on “Maritime Strategy and the Twenty-First Century.” He postulates that naval planners must return to basics in the wake of the enormous global changes since the end of the Cold War. The first step is to identify the tasks required of navies, which range from outright warfighting to humanitarian operations, resource protection, and presence missions. This range of operational requirements, while broadly traditional in character, will present enormous challenges to navies, which are universally dwindling in size.

This is a fine work, full of serious thought, and it deserves a place in any library of strategic and maritime writings.

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Rodger, N.A.M., ed. *Naval Power in the Twentieth Century*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1994. 273pp. \$45

This work is a compilation of nineteen papers presented in July 1994 at the Exeter Conference, which addressed various aspects of seapower during this century. This anthology boasts a collection of international experts in naval power, including George W. Baer, Eric Grove, Geoffrey Till, Herve Coutaubegari, Michael Epkenhans, and others.

In the introduction, editor N.A.M. Rodger discusses the evolution of doctrinal and strategic thinking from Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* to Paul M. Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*. Rodger contends that despite the inadequacies of Mahanian concepts, no "general explanation of how naval power works and why it is important . . . can credibly be applied to many different nations and navies . . . in the circumstances of the past and present." He suggests that this volume attempts to form a cogent general theory of naval power.

There is no coherent thematic chapter arrangement, but the papers fall into

two main categories. The most compelling section provides an analysis of the policies, planning, and strategies of the world's navies (with the exception of China) from 1900 to the early 1990s. The subsequent category examines such specific operations and campaigns as the Arctic convoys to Russia during the Second World War.

In the chapters on policies, planning, and strategies, the authors posit that Mahanian concepts and doctrine emerge as primary catalysts for constructing and maintaining powerful fleet-based navies. Yet these contributors accurately note that while Mahan's influence proved applicable to some nations, Mahanian strategic thought was not a panacea for all.

Throughout the twentieth century all navies have had to redefine their roles. Although prewar navies continually evaluated new missions, such as amphibious operations, their top priority remained the large surface fleet centered on the battleship. Exceptions included Canada, which maintained only an antisubmarine warfare force. World naval leaders also carefully observed the evolution of naval warfare and contemplated the prospective uses of carrier-based air power.

In the postwar world, planners of small and midsize navies reevaluated their fleets'