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In Defense of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology and British Naval Policy 1889-1914

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“supplanting Russia and excluding Germany.”

In conclusion, Williamson has provided a superb corrective to the Germanocentric view of the origins of the First World War. In crisp, well-chiseled sentences the author has laid out the motivations that prompted Vienna to choose war in 1914 as well as both their short-term and long-term results. A more balanced interpretation of the July Crisis of 1914 should emerge as a result of his labors.

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Sumida, Jon Tetsuro. *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology and British Naval Policy 1889-1914*. Scranton, Pa.: Harper Collins, 1989. 377pp. \$70

Sumida has offered a study that will profoundly influence our understanding of the Royal Navy before World War I and, in the widest sense, how we view the relationships between technology, finance, and government policy.

The author traces the growth of British naval spending while Britain faced emerging threats from continental Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He connects the pressing requirement to achieve economies in the defence votes with the appointment of the reformist John Fisher as First Sea Lord in 1904. The key to Fisher's confidence that he could improve Britain's imperial security while effecting reductions in naval spending

was his belief in the potential of radical technical innovation, particularly the all-big-gun ship, the first of which was the *Dreadnought* of 1906.

Sumida explains Fisher's attempts to embody his ideal fighting ship in a vessel with the endurance and speed necessary to find its opponents and force them into action at a range of its own choosing—at which its superior gunnery ensured that there could be no effective reply. Critical to Fisher's plans for such a “super ship” was his assumption (he did not fully comprehend the complex issues involved) that Britain was on the verge of producing a fire control system that could operate effectively in the worst conditions of sea and visibility when both target and firing platform were manoeuvring, achieving hits at ranges at which Britain's opponents could not. The ideal fighting ship, in Fisher's words, was “never meant to get in [the] enemy's range!” and thus did not require heavy armour.

The failure of the fire control project defeated the concept. Without such predictive systems, it was too easy (as the Germans were to demonstrate) to produce a ship of equal firepower and speed with superior protection. Because the story of gunnery fire control has never before been comprehensively explained, a popular belief has developed that the *Dreadnought* represented the real “revolution” in capital ship design, and that the faster but ill-protected battle cruisers represented an evolutionary cul-de-sac because of their vulnerability to vessels with better

protection and comparable speed. The true story is much more complex.

Sumida's careful analysis shows how the journalist and inventor Arthur Hungerford Pollen came to define the gunnery problem and set about solving it before anyone else. Pollen's complex travails are discussed with great skill and at necessary length. The Admiralty's misjudgments resulted in the rejection of Pollen's equipment in favor of an inferior, partly plagiarised version that was incapable of providing a fire control solution for a manoeuvring ship and thus proved ineffective under the conditions of the coming war. While Pollen made errors in his relationships with the Royal Navy, it is clear that neither its personnel nor administrative structures were capable of dealing with the complex technology of gunnery fire control. Although Sumida is restrained in his conclusions, the incapacity of the understaffed Admiralty to manage a navy of the size of 1910 is manifest. This proved to have dire consequences during the First World War. Similarly, the technical comprehension of most "expert" officers left much to be desired, not from a lack of formal technical training but through a general absence of intellectual curiosity, due to some extent to sheer overwork both in the Admiralty and at sea.

Sumida's work not only illuminates an important aspect of naval history but suggests directions for further research. His own interests are demonstrated in his plans for a sequel to cover the years to 1939 as well as in a

recent paper, "British Naval Administration in the Age of Fisher," which reveals more about the Admiralty's fundamental difficulties in this era.

In addition, we need to know more about Fisher's thinking. The creative, and derivative, ferment which was his mind can be likened to an intellectual catherine wheel. He has been compared to Hyman Rickover; but while his ability to grasp great concepts was equally remarkable, he possessed little of the latter's comprehension of the associated risks and technical difficulties encountered in placing *any* new system into service. Sumida has been careful not to overstress the connection between predictive fire control and Fisher's "all-big-gun" theories, but the evolution of the Admiral's thinking on the subject *without benefit of hindsight* deserves more attention. This process has been started by Charles Fairbanks in his essay, "The Origins of the *Dreadnought* Revolution: A Historical Essay."

Jon Sumida's effort to improve our understanding of the Royal Navy before the First World War can best be summed up by St. Matthew: "The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner."

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Schom, Alan. *Trafalgar: Countdown to Battle, 1803-1805*. New York: Atheneum, 1990. 431pp. \$27.50
This book starts off with a dubious proposition—namely, that "most