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PROFESSIONAL READING

A Harmonic in Some Diverse Writing on British Naval History

John B. Hattendorf

Cordingly, Davis. *Nicholas Pocock 1740-1821*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986. 120pp. \$18.95

Gough, Barry M. *Gunboat Frontier: British Maritime Authority and Northwest Coast Indians, 1846-1890*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984. 287pp. \$27.95

Lambert, Andrew. *Battleships in Transition: The Creation of the Steam Battlefleet 1815-1860*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1985. 200pp. \$18.95

Ranft, Brian, ed. *Ironclad to Trident: 100 Years of Defence Commentary: Brassey's 1886-1986*. London, England: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1986. 407pp. \$39

Rodger, N.A.M. *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986. 445pp. \$21.95

Semmel, Bernard. *Liberalism and Naval Strategy: Ideology, Interest and Sea Power during the Pax Britannica*. Winchester, Mass.: Allen and Unwin, 1986. 239pp. \$34.95

The recent spate of books on British naval history has touched a wide variety of topics and has ranged across the centuries. Some particularly important recent works have already been reviewed in this journal, such as Piers Mackesy's *War Without Victory* (November-December 1985); Brian Lavery's *The Ship of the Line* (March-April 1986) and Philip Zeigler's *Mountbatten* (Winter, 1987). In addition to those volumes, there

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are a half-dozen more that deserve to be grouped together as books that suggest a broad subtle change of emphasis in writing naval history. A glance at the list above produces no obvious connection between the titles, nor for that matter does one hear the same note struck in reading the books. Yet amidst the various chords produced, one can detect a resonance among all these works as one listens to the *sinfonietta* of naval history. Each study, in its own way, relates naval affairs to the broader concerns of society in general. Each is a specialized work, but at the same time, each brings light to its subject by demonstrating a relationship between naval history and some aspect of general history. Not long ago, naval history was so specialized that few without professional naval interests, a technical background and practical experience even bothered to read it. Only 70 years ago, the British naval historian Sir Julian Corbett lamented that naval history had not found its rightful place. "The general historian . . . cannot afford to neglect naval history," Corbett wrote, "and he is the poorer for that link never having been fully forged for him." In the intervening years, one can virtually count on one's fingers the number of first-class works of naval history that have succeeded in reaching toward that goal. Now, to have the authors listed here, as well as others simultaneously working along such lines, certainly suggests that a silent revolution has occurred in the field. This change has been readily obvious within the academic world which now shows strong interest in naval and military affairs. This change also needs to be fully appreciated by the naval profession. What once was a narrow specialist preserve has now rapidly become an example of something with broader ramifications. With this change, the body of expertise is shifting toward those who see the navy, not as a world apart, but as a small part of the whole world. The challenge for the navy is not to resist the change of emphasis, nor to resist what might be seen as the intrusion of outsiders. The challenge is to learn to benefit from the new insights which this change brings with it. Naturally, the new emphasis will tend to emphasize civil, political, intellectual and social issues, and it might be thought that some of the more specialized topics of purely professional interest might be forgotten. That need not be the case, but surely this new emphasis will add to our understanding through a cross-fertilization of thought and reflection.

Nicholas Rodger's *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* deals with the earliest period among these books, and it is the most recent to appear. For the social history of the Royal Navy it stands as a beacon amidst largely uncharted waters. At the same time, it suggests a corrective to the work of earlier writers, particularly to Michael Lewis's *A Social History of the Navy*, John Masfield's *Sea Life in Nelson's Time* and Dudley Pope's *Life in Nelson's Navy*. However, these volumes, upon which our understanding of the social history of the navy rests, deal with the Napoleonic War period. Rodger's

work is a very carefully documented study of the social conditions within the navy during the Seven Years War, 1756-1763, in which he goes on to draw, with some caution, conclusions for the larger period 1740-1775. While the book is not the sweeping survey of the social history of the 18th century navy, as the title would suggest, Rodger's indepth examination, using hitherto untapped sources, paints a quite different picture of social conditions than the earlier writers have suggested. Traditionally, we have been led to believe that the English Navy of this period was a kind of floating concentration camp, but Nicholas Rodger skillfully shows that the social characteristics of the navy and society at-large were quite similar. Given the social values of both officers and enlisted men, a rigid and oppressive regime would not have been tolerated in the mid-18th century. As Rodger puts it, "no one who has ever commanded ships or men imagines that cruelty or oppression are the way to mould an efficient fighting force." British society in the 18th century displayed a kind of disordered cohesion, and so did the navy. "This made for a loose and disorderly system," Rodger writes, "but it also linked officers and their men together by the bonds of mutual need. Officers were not in a position to get what they wanted by the simple exercise of force and authority, and those who might have been inclined by nature to do so were restrained by the knowledge that the attempt would be counterproductive." In coming to this conclusion, Rodger relates the facts in a lucid style with a sense of humor and a keen eye for fascinating anecdotes. He is a rare writer who can coat his assiduous examination of the documents and pioneering analysis, based on the dry data of musters and paybooks, with engaging and readable prose.

Rodger examines with care the full range of issues from shipboard life, food and health, to career patterns, manning, discipline and politics. At the end of the volume there are appendices that provide a series of fascinating tables to support his conclusions and serve as a resource for other students of social history. Rodger's conclusion "that for all its undoubted peculiarities, the Navy resembled the society from which it was recruited in many more ways than it differed from it," expresses most clearly the new emphasis in naval history. His work is certainly a brilliant contribution to 18th century studies as well as a model for similar investigations of other periods and other navies.

David Cordingly's small book, *Nicholas Pocock 1740-1821*, is a study of a naval artist, and its value lies beyond the specialized interest of marine art historians. Indeed, Pocock is an unusual subject because so many of his working drawings, sketches and letters have survived. Using this material, Cordingly has been able to produce a portrait of a man that links the artist's own experience at sea, as well as his artistic work and career, with the taste of his high-ranking naval patrons and the evidence of historical events which these patrons provided to the artist. Cordingly's success in linking naval

history and art history is valuable. One hopes that this first volume in the *Conway Marine Artists* series is only the first step in an examination that could significantly enlarge our perspective. Needless to say, this is a neglected field, and it is one made far more difficult by the fact that “the admirals who commissioned paintings of sea battles, and the captains who ordered ship portraits were less concerned with a painter’s artistic qualifications than with his knowledge of seamanship.” Yet elucidation of that fact, which typifies so much naval art, certainly gives us a deeper perspective in appreciating both artist and art from an entirely new vantage point.

At first glance, Andrew Lambert’s *Battleships in Transition* seems to be a book designed for the ship buff who is fascinated with the details of ship construction, rigging, and armament. The tables detailing such particulars and the well-chosen illustrations serve that purpose well. Yet the book is much more than that. Lambert also provides an interpretation which explains the nature of transition in warship design and shows the rationale for it in terms of both technical development and naval policy. In short, Lambert has attempted to take the study of warship design, which in the past has been seen only as a separate subject, and unite it with the mainstream of naval historical writing. This is a laudable goal which others can usefully emulate in the light of Lambert’s success in this direction.

Two dates, 1815 and 1860, mark important periods in British naval history. The end of the Napoleonic War in 1815 is often regarded as the final high point in the age of fighting sail, while the year 1860, in which the first armored battleship, H.M.S. *Warrior*, was launched, is often used to mark the beginning of the era of modern warships. The 45 years between these two periods is usually forgotten, its warships regarded as ungainly and ill-designed wooden hybrids which could neither sail nor steam effectively. In fact, as Andrew Lambert brilliantly demonstrates in his richly illustrated volume, the years between 1815 and 1860 were a period of ferment, testing, and experimentation in which the steam battlefleet was created.

The central figure in Lambert’s study is Captain Sir Baldwin Walker, Surveyor of the Royal Navy from 1847 to 1861. The British wooden steam warship was essentially his creation. A conservative and methodical man who lived in an era of dramatic innovation, Walker guided the surveyor’s office along a path of evolution, rather than revolution, in introducing new naval technology. Leaving radical innovations to the French, he used superior British construction methods and conversions of older ships to maintain an effective balance.

By 1860, it was already clear that wood was no longer a suitable material for warship construction. Wood could not carry the concentrated weight of the newly developed engines and ordnance, but the change had been long delayed for several reasons. At first, timber was substantially cheaper than

iron, however this changed to give iron the advantage. Secondly, wooden hulls offered crews far better protection until armor plate was developed. Even then wooden hulled ironclads proved far stronger than ships built entirely of iron. Only after the navy adapted the idea of fitting armor plates, backed with a substantial amount of wood, to an iron hull was it proved that iron hulls could support more armor than wooden ones could. In addition, the Crimean War (1854-56) provided the first occasion when industrial nations mobilized their newly found technological powers to fight a war, and at the same time provided a stimulus to further research and development in warship design.

Lambert's book is clearly focused on British history, although developments in Russia, Turkey, the United States, Austria, Sweden, Denmark and Italy are summarized in three pages—and four pages of text are given to France. American readers will be interested to note that the British Navy had been particularly impressed by the U.S. Navy's steam frigate *Niagara* and the *Merrimack* class. The British built the *Mersey* class of 40 gun frigates in 1856-1858 as a direct response to American innovation. In general, this is a useful reference work combined with an insightful, extended essay on a transition period in naval ship design.

Gunboat Frontier is a masterful conclusion to Barry Gough's trilogy devoted to the Royal Navy's activities on the Canadian west coast in the 19th century. The previous volumes in the series, *The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast of North America 1810-1914* (1971), and *Distant Dominion* (1980), rightfully attracted attention as well-researched and superbly written histories in the tradition of Gerald Graham. These earlier books dealt with the more commonly understood elements of naval power, extending the knowledge of naval historians to little known and seldom appreciated events. In his latest book, Gough examines an entirely new aspect of the subject: the interaction of the navy and the natives who were the objects of naval operations. Naval historians have traditionally looked at the continuum of a nation's national policy and strategy with its expression in terms of naval operations. Gough has taken a significant step forward in scholarship by including in that understanding the cross-cultural relations which are so often ignored, but which are so typical of overseas naval operations. His work in this area is all the more striking as it is a historical examination of the relationship between a European power and aborigines with few written records.

The central theme of the book is the navy as an instrument in extending British law and order among the Indians. In developing the theme, Gough first examines the relevant differences between white and Indian societies in the period, then reviews both British and Canadian provincial policy toward the Indians in British Columbia, focusing on the way in which the navy attempted to stop slavery, control the liquor trade, as well as to protect and support Christian missions in the region.

The readers of this journal will undoubtedly value the book more as a case study in naval power than for its contribution to Canadian history and the history of the American Indian, or even the light it throws on U.S. policy in Alaska. Yet, Gough's contribution in these areas is equally distinguished, even if it is not described in this review. The most interesting aspect for the general naval reader of this book is to see the customary technique used by a gunboat commander in carrying out his mission. Unquestionably, it was a technique which involved the use of force as a last alternative, but which maintained the resort to force as a credible choice for a naval commander, following a process of steadily escalating and selective pressures, short of all-out violence.

The customary technique for a gunboat commander was first to place his ship in a position where he could obviously use his guns to their greatest effect should they be needed. Then, as a show of force, he might draw attention to this fact by firing guns or rockets at a target. By the 1880s, searchlights could be used to increase the effect at night. Having suggestively demonstrated the potential use of his gunboat, the commander then attempted to reach his goals starting at the opposite end of the spectrum. First, he had a parley with the natives. If that brought no immediate results, he moved to punish publicly the offenders involved in petty crimes. If these restrained actions still brought no result, the commander then seized property, such as canoes which could also restrict the Indians' means of escape. Moreover, he could take chiefs as hostages until certain conditions were met. Throughout this process, an astute naval commander needed to be aware of the risks he was taking and the reactions of the other side. Therefore, he needed a constant stream of intelligence which was obtained by sending interpreters ashore with the police and by hiring native informants.

If the process of gradual escalation brought no satisfactory effect, overt force was used to destroy the livelihood of the natives. Gunboat sailors burned salmon weirs and canoes, torched villages and killed some of the inhabitants. As Gough phrased it, "If caught and tried, the guilty would be hanged before the assembled tribe. But in many cases, the smouldering ruins of a village and a scattered tribe were the telling testaments of the process of keeping Northwestern coast Indians in awe of British power."

Thus, the *Pax Britannica* constituted a system of worldwide dominion, but it was an empire based on power and not infrequently marked by racial and cultural tension. Peace in the British Empire meant a series of wars and low-level conflicts. In British eyes, this was a battle to establish virtue, law and order, and to prevent anarchy and chaos among peoples. It was a deeply felt responsibility which carried with it the high vision of eradicating slavery, piracy, murder, theft, cannibalism, and intertribal warfare. As an aside to this central purpose, there was Britain's prospect for gain through

trade and strategic position. In British Columbia, the character of this rule was determined, not by the distant committees meeting in London, but by the local governor and the local military and naval commanders on the spot. Their decisions and judgments mattered the most and characterized the era.

Despite the heavy cost of a "world police force," Britain clung to the basic principles of gunboat diplomacy for most of the 19th century: enforcement of local law and order through the threat of legalized violence. Barry Gough's case study is a major contribution to naval history and to understanding "gunboat diplomacy."

Bernard Semmel's *Liberalism and Naval Strategy* represents a welcome contribution to naval literature from a different quarter. All of the other scholars whose works I have mentioned here have been naval specialists whose work has broadened out to link other aspects of society with their special interest. Semmel, however, is an established student of liberal ideology who focuses on the navy for the first time. While his work occasionally betrays an unfamiliarity with naval affairs, these few slips are unimportant and do not mar the main point of his well-researched study of the naval literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Semmel demonstrates that liberal ideology played a key role in the shaping of naval policy in that period. While liberal ideology is often characterized as pacifist and antimilitary in nature, Semmel demonstrates that then, as well as now, there are different conceptions of the ideology, some of which played a role in formulating naval plans. Among these were naval operations against the slave trade; war on, as well as the protection of, commerce; the debate over offensive and defensive conceptions of strategy; policies regarding neutral shipping; and international maritime law.

The author paints a picture of two extreme ideological types. On the one hand, he shows a radical-liberal, and on the other, a reactionary-conservative. But he cautions that these are stereotypes, and the idea of a polarization between the two must be guarded against. The characterization of the two serves a useful purpose in showing a difference in outlook, although in practice, a more practical and qualified version of the types were involved in naval debates. In looking at his two "ideal" types, he characterizes them as "a free trader confronting a mercantilist, a cosmopolitan and internationalist opposing a nationalist and patriot; an advocate of liberal maritime policy versus an up-holder of belligerent rights at sea." The radical-liberal saw himself as rational and peace-loving in the vanguard of progress, while the conservative insisted that men were always as they had been and would ever be: ruled by passion, a thirst for power and warlike. When one sees the naval debate of 1880-1914 unfold in these terms, one gets a very valuable and useful insight into the nature of the social and intellectual outlooks which drive the debate over the fundamental uses of the navy. It is an insight useful not only to the historian but also to the observer of current discussion.

This book is not easy reading for one unfamiliar with the historical period or one unfamiliar with the intellectual viewpoints expressed. That aside, it is a valuable and far-reaching contribution to our understanding of naval history on a wide plane.

With *Ironclad to Trident*, the well-known British naval historian, Brian Ranft, has produced an excellent centenary volume for *Brassey's Annuals*. Founded in 1886 by the famous naval specialist Thomas Brassey, the *Annual* has flourished for a century under a variety of names. First called the *Navy Annual*, it has also been titled the *Naval and Shipping Annual*, *Brassey's Annual: The Armed Forces Yearbook*, and today it continues as the *Royal United Services Institute and Brassey's Defence Yearbook*. Each change has reflected the way people have viewed naval matters over the last hundred years, first as a specialist subject, then merging with shipping and merchant marine, and finally as part of a broader understanding complementing the other services under the rubric of defense. The mutation in names is perhaps more than a reflection of various editorial preferences. It shows the maturation of thought on naval and defense matters over the last century.

A century of volumes is a library in itself, and it has been no easy task to pare down these riches into a cohesive single volume. Professor Ranft has not only done an excellent job in accomplishing that, but also provides us with an outlined history of the publication and, through his selections, reminds us of the rich trove to be found in the full set of *Brassey's Annuals* sitting on the library shelves. Ranft's sound approach to his task has been to divide up the 100 years into chronological sections which have a thematic unity and to select those articles which, in his judgment, best depict the most significant developments—both as they were seen during those years and as we look back on those years from the standpoint of today. In addition to the articles, Ranft has also selected a fine group of illustrations and advertisements from the volumes.

The themes which have been chosen are "Global Rivalry and Technological Change" in the period 1886-1904; "Anglo-German Rivalry and Continuing Technical Advance," 1905-1914; "The Great War," 1914-1919; "Disarmament and the Air Power Controversy," 1920-1935; "The Approach to War," 1936-1939; "World War II: Interpreting the Lessons," 1940-1949; "Infantry Wars in a Nuclear Age," 1950-1956; "Strains within Nato: The ICBM," 1957-1965; "Nato and the Increasing Soviet Threat," 1966-1981. Over the years, the *Annual* expressed a wide outlook, not confining itself entirely to British views. Among these selections, Ranft has chosen some distinguished American naval leaders, including an article by W.S. Sims in 1907 on "Tactical Qualities of the Dreadnought Type of Battleship," E.J. King on "U.S. Naval Aviation" in 1936, C.W. Nimitz on the "Future Employment of Naval Forces" in 1948, and E.P. Holmes on "NATO from a

SACLANT Point of View” in 1971. Going over the list of articles one is struck, too, by the growing contribution of academics to defense literature. In the selections, we note the names of such well-known writers as Alistair Buchan, Michael Howard, John Erikson, and Lawrence Freedman. Notable, too, are the writings of senior officers and defense officials, ranging from Winston Churchill’s statement in the House of Commons as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1914, to J.M.A.H. Luns on NATO defense in 1978, to the final article by the current Chief of the British Defence Staff, Admiral of the Fleet Sir John Fieldhouse, on “British Defence Issues, 1986.”

Throughout its history, *Brassey’s Annuals* have sought to provide intelligent commentary and accurate information on defense matters. Utilizing well the nature of the material at hand, Brian Ranft has made a judicious selection of commentaries from the wealth of *Brassey’s Annuals*, providing historical insight into the development of modern defense thinking.

With these six volumes, one can sense a widely reaching change of emphasis in writing naval history. It is not a new development, but one that has occurred slowly over a long period of time. What is new, however, is the proliferation of the broad perspective in linking naval affairs with society at large. This is something which should be welcomed not only in academic circles, but within the navy itself.

Cimbala, Stephen J., ed. *The Reagan Defense Program: An Interim Assessment*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1986. 215pp. \$35

Stephen Cimbala deserves praise for presenting a symposium in print that allows the reader to be led in quick succession from the realities and appearances of the present and previous National administrations through a discussion of decisionmaking processes, or the seeming inconsistencies thereof, to a remarkably clear discussion of defense manpower by Lawrence Korb. The middle of the book features a chapter on “Special Operations Forces in the 1980s” and a chapter on the War Powers Resolution that includes, as an appendix, the text

of the 1973 resolution that was passed over President Nixon’s veto. The remaining 40 percent concerns the Reagan record on strategic weapons—“Ballistic Missile Defense: The Strategic Defense Initiative,” arms control, and a summary of the Reagan Strategic Offensive Modernization Program. All contributors to Cimbala’s symposium are academic political scientists who carry out their assessments from the viewpoints of that discipline.

In a brief review designed to help the professional naval audience decide the potential value of this addition to the literature, and perhaps also its value as a personal accession, it would be folly to attempt to discuss and