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Edward Preble: A Naval Biography, 1761-1807

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Writing to President John Adams in 1799, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert remarked:

Our Navy at this time, when its character is to form, ought to be commanded by men who, not satisfied with escaping censure, will be unhappy if they do not receive and merit praise; by men who have talents and activity, as well as spirit, to assist a judicious arrangement for the employment of the force under their command or to cure the defects of a bad one.

Professor Christopher McKee, librarian at Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa, uses this quotation as the theme of his scholarly biography of Capt. Edward Preble. Focusing on the detailed events of Preble's career from his youth in Maine, through service in the Massachusetts Navy during the Revolution and experience in the merchant marine, to his career in the U.S. Navy, McKee paints him as the personification of the American naval officer corps that came to leadership between 1801 and 1807. Although Preble was a stern captain who did not always command a happy ship, McKee sees that his success was based on the intellectual ability to understand the military, diplomatic, and commercial aspects of the naval profession and to harmonize, in his actions, the administration's policies with that understanding. In this way, McKee weaves the tactics of the squadron before Tripoli with Jeffersonian naval policy. Although not involved with the intellectual issues of strategic theory or the origins of policy, McKee rather successfully deals with Preble at the point where strategy, tactics, policy, and personality interact. This study is a useful contribution to an area of American naval history that has long been

ignored. It is thoroughly documented with primary source materials dispersed in depositories ranging from Paris and London to Portland, Maine; Washington, D.C.; and California.

McKee's careful scholarship adds insight into the history of the U.S. Navy's early period. While what he says is valuable, it is not the only approach that may be taken for a study of Preble. Seen in the broader perspective of American and modern European history, the student also needs to understand the reasons why Preble captured the popular imagination with his vigorous campaign in the Mediterranean and the effect that it had in broad national and international terms. McKee's work is generally confined to specific naval, maritime, and diplomatic events. He leaves for others to discuss the broad ramifications of these problems.

For instance, one might note that the Congressional gold medal inscribed to Preble, "*Vindici Commercii Americani Ante Tripoli*," reflected the sustained purpose behind the war and was an expression of the emerging American nationality and patriotism. At the same time, the comments of prominent men of the day brought recognition to a fledgling country. Horatio Nelson could say that the burning of the frigate *Philadelphia* was "The most bold and daring Act of the Age" and the Pope could declare that Preble "with a small force and in a short space of time, has done more for the cause of Christianity than the most powerful nations of Christendom have done for ages."

The detailed drawings of battle tactics and the extensive quotation from primary sources may make this volume less appealing to the general reader. However, it is a valuable contribution to the library of a specialist.