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Eric W. Osborne, *The Battle of Heligoland Bight*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2006. 141 pages, notes, bibl., index, maps, cloth. ISBN 0-253-34742-4.

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The Battle of the Heligoland Bight has the stated intent of analysing the story of the first large scale naval action of the First World War in the North Sea to a greater level of detail and with more attention to the Imperial German Navy than has been the case in previous works published in the UK or USA . In this, it is generally successful. The narrative is sensible, comprehensible (despite the complexity of the story) and thorough. Its tone is balanced and detached and the author clearly has achieved a sound understanding of the challenges that both sides faced in an uncertain strategic, operational and tactical environment in which all concerned were very much feeling their way. In his emphasis on the significance of the battle for the Germans on their approach to the naval campaign against the British over the following four years, Osborne makes some shrewd arguments. His thesis that the action was critical in setting the context for what was to follow is compelling.

Despite its undoubted qualities, however, *The Battle of the Heligoland Bight* presents certain difficulties. Most critically, it does not seem to have a logical audience and is unlikely to find one. Production standards, editing aside, are not high, as publication has clearly been undertaken on a shoe string. There are no photographs other than the cover, the typeface is tiny (to the point of being difficult to read) and the maps have either been recycled (with permission of the publisher, USNI) from this reviewer's own book *The King's Ships Were at Sea*, published as long ago as 1984, or from the German official history, which is even older. It is thus most unlikely that *The Battle of Heligoland Bight*

will appeal to, or even reach those readers (and there are many) who have a general interest in the history of war at sea. This is not a work that could be recommended as a holiday gift, whereas skilful illustration and a more sympathetic publisher could have resulted in a book of considerable popular interest – and thus a much wider circulation.

On the other hand, *The Battle of Heligoland Bight* does not, despite its academic approach, derive sufficiently from new research that it can provide fresh insights for specialists in naval history beyond its greater focus on the detail of the action and on the German aspects than has been the case for previous English language work on the subject. Some of the secondary authorities cited are either somewhat dubious, being themselves wholly reliant on other, dated published sources, or have been overtaken by more recent publications. This reviewer would have preferred, as a background to the battle, to see much more analysis of the problems which both navies were facing in 1914 and the factors at play between 1904 and 1914 in naval policy and operational planning, building on the work which has been done in the last two decades to better understand the era. Much more attention to technology, in particular, and its relationship to the operational reality would have been particularly useful.

It is not too much to say that *The Battle of Heligoland Bight* is symptomatic of our continuing inability to produce an effective marriage between academic naval history and more ‘popular’ work. Too much of what constitutes published history that is accessible is not accurate and, equally, too much of what is truly accurate is not readily accessible. In relation to the First World War in particular, we need to make a change and make it now. It is not fair to the wider public to allow their historical understanding to rest upon assumptions which are fundamentally mistaken or upon analysis which has long been overtaken by serious and discriminating research. Nearly a century after the outbreak of the Great War, there is an overwhelming case for an international effort to re-assess the conflict at sea from the basis of thorough historical research and with the benefit of the work that has been done in recent years on the years leading up to 1914. None of the official histories still constitute comprehensive, or even reliable sources and they do not, even considered together, present a credible narrative of a conflict much less bloody than

the land war, but which had its own significance. We need to start a 'Great War Naval Project' that will set about such work and within a time span that will allow its first products to be available at the time of the centenary of the start of the First World War, now less than eight years ahead.



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