

## International Journal of Naval History

---

October 2002

Volume 1 Number 2

Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy Between the Wars* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), retail \$51.00

Reviewed by Warwick M. Brown, King's College, London, Department of War Studies

---

This eminently readable work examines how the Royal Navy's conception of seapower shaped its strategic policies between the two world wars. Dr. Bell allies his study with a number of revisionist works contending that senior naval officers of the period were more far-sighted and professionally competent than some historians have suggested. His principal methodology was to examine the Navy's strategic planning, which he argues reveals a sound knowledge of the principles of seapower.

After emphasising how fundamental naval power was to the British Empire and that Britain's naval 'decline' in the 1920s is greatly exaggerated in conventional accounts (Roskill in particular), Dr. Bell scrutinizes the important political and financial context in which British strategists had to work. He argues that the handy bean-counting formula of the naval standard — that the RN should be equal to one power, two powers, or one plus 60% — was not so immutable as some have depicted. Instead, it had as much to do with the Navy's eternal battle with the Treasury as with the threat of any foreign power, and he asserts the size of the Navy was soundly based on Britain's contemporary strategic requirements.

The *Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy Between the Wars* moves on to examine the Admiralty's strategic contingency plans, country by country. First, the United States, against which preparation never progressed beyond the rudimentary stage before the Cabinet intervened to prohibit further planning, as it concluded a war with the United States would be ruinous folly and was to be avoided at all costs. Britain's planning for an Anglo-Japanese war, the 'Singapore Strategy', rightly receives the author's greatest attention. He dismisses what he believes is the widely accepted notion that sending a fleet to Singapore was unrealistic in the 1920s, impractical in the 1930s and responsible for the demise of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* in 1941 as a caricature of the Admiralty's Far East war-planning. Moving the fleet to Singapore was, Bell asserts, only the first phase of a complex plan and mainly a logistical one at that. Once in theatre the fleet would proceed to disrupt Japanese trade sufficiently to hopefully force them to seek a major engagement in which the Japanese battle fleet would be destroyed enabling a tighter blockade to be imposed, and thereby forcing the Japanese to seek terms. As Bell

observes, “[the RN] was not, however obsessed with fighting a Far Eastern Jutland. After the First World War, the navy increasingly viewed seapower as a means to exert economic pressure on an enemy and protect Britain’s seaborne trade.”

He does, however, concede these plans were optimistic. It would have been helpful to remind the reader that the 1922 Washington Treaty prohibited any addition to Hong Kong’s facilities and defences, thereby inhibiting naval planning. It is also easy for the reader to have in mind the 1941-45 Pacific War and, with hindsight, think Japan was too tough a nut to crack for the RN with the resources it had available. Yet forcing Japan to seek terms was quite a different matter from forcing an unconditional surrender. Nevertheless planners took scant account of what could cause a war and therefore what Britain’s war aims might be, other than to ‘win’. Dr Bell discusses the various revisions to the Far East war plans necessitated by the decreasing availability of ships for an Anglo-Japanese war—because of the increasing threat to Britain from European powers in the 1930s. Finally, he argues sending the Prince of Wales and Repulse in 1941 was not a foolish remnant of the Singapore Strategy but a political gesture to demonstrate British support for America’s Pacific policy, and thus make the Japanese think twice before acting aggressively.

Naval planning against Germany was along similar lines to that of the previous conflict: blockade and containment. The addition of Italy to the list of possible enemies tipped the balance against a Royal Navy confident it could deal with Japan and Germany individually, or even at a pinch, simultaneously, since “the navy also expected that war with Germany would automatically mean war with Japan as well.” But with Italian naval forces threatening to sever the Mediterranean route to Britain’s eastern Empire Britain’s resources were finally stretched too far. This forced admirals and politicians alike to accept unpalatable decisions; namely, to support “Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement”.

The author puts forward a compelling case countering the exaggeration of Britain’s naval decline during the 1920s. Dr Bell is clearly on the side of the admirals and places the blame for Britain’s naval decline 1929-35 squarely on the shoulders of politicians who had no idea what the concept of seapower meant; an ignorance that, he states, also prevented more money being spared for the Navy during the period of rearmament, 1936-39. His acknowledgment, however, that even if the navy had received more funds “not all of its prescriptions would have improved Britain’s strategic position,” makes his defence of the intellectual capacity of the officer corps less convincing. If politicians were ignorant of seapower the admirals were equally ignorant of politics. Thus, even though they were drawn from wider social backgrounds than earlier periods, they still came from a very narrow section of society (as the chapter on “Naval Propaganda and the British Public” illustrates) and had strong conservative and conventional views. Conventional officers therefore produced conventional plans. To develop his argument fully more on the officers who drew up the war plans and the position of the Planning Department within the Admiralty would have been useful. Did, for example, the most gifted officers seek the post of Director of Plans, regarding it as a step on their way up the promotion ladder, or as just another Whitehall desk job to be avoided?

Still, there is a world of difference between an incomplete work and one that leaves the reader enticed into wanting more. This book falls squarely into the latter category and is recommended as essential reading for any one interested in naval history, 1918-45.



The Editors  
International Journal of Naval History  
[editors@ijnhonline.org](mailto:editors@ijnhonline.org)

© Copyright 2001, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved