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Christian Dedet, *Les fleurs d'acier du Mikado* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993)

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Reviewed by Larrie D. Ferreiro, U.S. Office of Naval Research [London]

Few men can claim to be the author of a fleet of warships. Louis Emile Bertin has the distinction of being perhaps the only naval constructor in history to have created *two* entire fleets; and more curiously, the first of these belonged to a country other than his own. In 1885, the Imperial Japanese Navy persuaded the French *Génie Maritime* to send Bertin to become their Director of Naval Construction for a period of four years, in order to jump-start the Meiji Emperor's fledgling navy. Bertin, then aged 45, was a promising but still mid-level naval constructor; this was an extraordinary opportunity, as his wife later noted, to have an entire fleet signed with his name. The French government was just as eager for Bertin to go, for it represented a major coup in their fight against Britain and Germany for influence over the newly-industrializing Japan. Bertin and his family set sail in late 1885, and returned to France in 1890. During that time, he designed and constructed seven major warships and 22 torpedo boats, which formed the nucleus of the budding Japanese Navy; these ships would later defeat the Chinese fleet at the Battle of the Yalu River in 1895, and help decimate the Russian fleet in the 1905 Battle of Tsushima Straits. As for Bertin, in 1896 he rose to become France's Director of Naval Construction, where he again put his stamp on a new fleet of over 30 ships.

Christian Dedet has brought to life this extraordinary episode which, as he explains, he happened upon in his daughter's history text, and wanted to know more than the two lines the book devoted to the subject. Dedet has written previously about exceptional characters in unusual situations-African explorers, bullfighters-so his choice of Emile Bertin is understandable. Bertin was certainly a man to be marked. He began his career in

law and only later switched to naval construction; he strove to become the heir to the greatest of French constructors, Dupuy de Lôme, who had designed the first iron-clad warship; he often flew in the face of the conventional wisdom (pointing out, for example, the need for a warship to retain some measure of stability *after* damage), and most unusually, he respected, and was highly regarded by, his British counterparts, this in a time when Anglo/French tensions were very high.

So it is unfortunate that, although Dedet takes pains to ensure that we become familiar with Bertin and his family during their sojourn in Japan, we lose sight of the purpose for which he was there. Much of Dedet's material comes from the diary of Bertin's daughter, Anna, who was just 16 when they left. She takes us on the voyage to Japan aboard the steamer *Djemnah*, and tells us that on their first night in Tokyo, the hotel next door burned to the ground. The family is surprised to learn that, in summer, Tokyo is insufferable and cholera-ridden, so like Parisians, everyone goes to the countryside. Bertin's wife Anne--Françoise almost succumbs to a typhoid attack. Anna herself tragically loses the boy she left behind, as Dedet reveals in an unfolding mystery-novel approach. The Bertin household becomes a centerpiece for the expatriate community, and is often the scene of 'europeanization' for Tokyo's nobles. The family also develops deep friendships and comes to love the country which will be their home for only a short time.

Dedet is meticulous in describing the political intrigues which swirled around Bertin, both in Japan and France. As Director of Naval Construction, Bertin was a *shokumin*, a Councilor to the Emperor, and *as* such, he traveled in the highest ranks of the Japanese government. But there were factions which preferred the British or Germans, so Bertin's position was more than once put into jeopardy. Bertin's fleet was conceived around the tactic of the line-ahead formation, at the time untested for modern warships; this went against the then-popular line-abreast formation, which was initially preferred in Japan as the 'samurai way' of charging straight into battle (Bertin was eventually vindicated at the Yalu). Back in France, he found himself at odds with the supporters of Admiral Aube's *Jeune Ecole*, and he more than once criticized the designs of his fellow constructors; his criticisms were later justified by the catastrophic sinking of the battleship *Bouvet* in 1915.

Of Bertin's labors in developing a new fleet of warships, we see only glimpses; and of the warships themselves, the eponymous "steel flowers of the Mikado", not even illustrations. Although Anna's diaries make it clear that her father spent long hours developing his plans, Dedet tells us very little about Bertin's efforts; the ships magically appear after several chapters involving kabuki theater and summers in the mountains. Dedet is also guilty of exaggerating Bertin's influence; he notes that one of Bertin's later designs is ordered, not from France but from Britain, yet does not explain that this was due to Japan's failing confidence after an earlier vessel sank en-route from France. In fact, Bertin's concept of lightly armored, heavily-gunned cruisers was soon overtaken by the pre-dreadnoughts, and after his departure Japan began ordering its ships from Britain.

Some of these faults may be due to a lack of source material; the author tells us that Bertin's dossier is missing, and many of the Japanese records were probably destroyed during WWII. Still, Christian Dedet must be admired for shining a light on a crucial but little-known aspect of both Japanese and French maritime history, and one hopes it will find its way into the English language. Dedet is correct in pointing out that Bertin's real legacy for Japan was his creation of a series of modern shipyards, most notably Yokosuka, now home to the U.S. Seventh Fleet. Dedet reminds us that, during the First World War, those very yards built twelve destroyers for France's embattled fleet. This is a fitting conclusion to a most remarkable story



The Editors
International Journal of Naval History
editors@ijnhonline.org

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