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Review of "Churchill and Fisher: Titans at the Admiralty" by Barry Gough

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Barry Gough. *Churchill and Fisher: Titans at the Admiralty.* Barnsley, UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2017. Pp. 600.

Barry Gough's new book *Churchill and Fisher: Titans at the Admiralty* is an important contribution to the already voluminous literature on both of these figures. Examining Winston Churchill and Admiral John Fisher's relationship and the naval developments of the first two decades of the twentieth century helps give new perspective on each man's personality and the positions they took on important issues. The book is a well-written narrative history of the era, aimed at both scholars and members of the public who are interested in naval history, Fisher or Churchill. However, the book could have dealt more with the role that the culture of the Royal Navy (RN) had on each man's career. Similarly, the imperial context of both men's lives is more hinted at than examined in a systematic manner. Nonetheless, Gough's book will provide new insights into the period for even the most knowledgeable scholar of the era.

Churchill and Fisher builds on the extensive naval historiography of the period and some of the immense body of literature on Churchill. In particular Gough cites the approach of Arthur Marder in his five volume *From Dreadnought to Scapa Flow* as a major inspiration. As such, he argues that a narrative approach to history, which emphasises the role of personality and contingency, best captures the naval developments of the early twentieth century (pp. xiii-xix). Following this approach allows Gough to place his extensive primary research at the heart of his argument. Gough's use of the personal papers of the Second Viscount Esher, who was a close friend of Fisher and at the centre of British political society, is particularly illuminating. Scholars of the period will almost certainly find documents or quotations that they have not seen before and so will likely follow the extensive endnotes very closely.

Churchill and Fisher begins with three chapters covering Fisher's early career, and his time at the Admiralty. Gough adds nuance to the historical genesis of a number of Fisher's reforms, showing, for instance, that Lord Selborne was a key player in the development of personnel reforms. Gough argues that "Fisher was essentially a democrat" and thus improving the conditions for the lower decks was an important concern for him (p. 82). He goes on to argue that the overall officer culture of the RN was the key reason that Fisher's personnel reforms met such resistance. Gough suggests that the main

thrust of these reforms was to professionalise the RN's officer corps and make it more open to those of a variety of social backgrounds.

The well-known feud between Fisher and Admiral Charles Beresford is set into the context of the wider opposition within the navy to Fisher's reforms. Gough also argues that Fisher's methods of leadership were also partly to blame for the resistance (p. 104). Gough shows the complexity of the dispute and effectively makes the case that it was far more than a personal feud. The ongoing disagreement eventually split the navy and became a subject of political controversy, resulting in Fisher's early retirement. The book's description of the dispute skillfully balances the importance of Fisher's reforms to the RN as it was modernised along with his more unscrupulous and controversial actions. The hints that Gough provides about the nature of the culture of the RN around the turn of the century are tantalising and this reviewer wishes that they had been more fully developed.

The development of *Dreadnought* and *Invincible* are discussed, though Gough contends that Fisher saw submarines as more revolutionary in their impact on naval warfare. This fact was only grasped by a few contemporaries, including Churchill. Churchill enters Gough's story towards the end of his discussion of Fisher's tenure as First Sea Lord, often in connection with Churchill's opposition to large Naval Estimates. He effectively illustrates how Churchill and Fisher's relationship grew from one where Fisher was highly skeptical of Churchill's intentions towards the navy into one where Churchill became Fisher's pupil in naval affairs.

Gough's treatment of Churchill is also even-handed. He gives Churchill credit for his effective handling of the buildup of the RN during his tenure as First Lord of the Admiralty. Churchill is in turn criticised for the limited naval staff system that proved insufficient for the demands that modern naval warfare placed on it. Churchill's tendency to ignore well-reasoned opposition and out-argue his opponents is also explored and emerges as one of the key reasons for Churchill and Fisher's split over the Dardanelles campaign.

Gough's discussion of Churchill's role in deploying the RN at the beginning of the First World War again demonstrates his careful documentary research. In spite of Churchill's well-known claim that he was the one that ordered the British fleet to stay mobilised following summer exercises, Gough shows that it was actually First Sea Lord Prince Louis of Battenberg who ordered that the fleet not

be demobilised and that Churchill merely approved the order when he returned to London after a weekend away (pp. 211-212). Though Gough is not always so careful in his research, such as when he somewhat inexplicably states that Room 40, the RN's code-breaking operation, was "in a quiet wing of the Old Admiralty Building," when in fact it was located in the same corridor as the Admiralty Board Room and the First Sea Lord's office.[1]

The early months of the First World War demonstrated Churchill's interest in offensive military operations such as his leadership of the defence of Antwerp, which Gough says "did him little credit" (p. 257). Fisher was recalled to the admiralty in November 1914 and initially worked well with Churchill as both men shared a strong desire to use the navy in offensive operations. However, in spite of early promise, Churchill and Fisher were ill-suited to working together as both men wanted supreme control of naval operations in their own hands. Fisher complained repeatedly to friends about Churchill circumventing his authority by privately writing to fleet commanders.

The Dardanelles operation looms large in any historical discussion of Churchill and Fisher and Gough helps to untangle who originated the idea of the operation and each man's role in either pushing it forward or opposing it.[2] Gough carefully pieces together how Churchill and Fisher's working relationship broke down during the planning of the Dardanelles. In late 1914 both Churchill and Fisher were initially intrigued by the possibility of forcing the Dardanelles by naval means alone. However, as Churchill and the Cabinet became increasingly fixed on forcing the Dardanelles by naval means alone, Fisher's concerns about the operation grew, though he only expressed his reservations privately. As the naval attack on the Dardanelles commenced, Churchill had essentially assumed operational command

[1] Patrick Beesly, *Room 40: British Naval Intelligence 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 15.

[2] The historiography on the Dardanelles and Gallipoli is massive; some recent highlights include Christopher M. Bell, *Churchill and the Dardanelles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), which provides a balanced account of Churchill's role in the Dardanelles Campaign. For a more critical and less balanced assessment of Churchill's role in the Dardanelles campaign, see Tom Curran, *The Grand Deception: Winston Churchill and the Dardanelles* (Newport, Australia: Big Sky Publishing, 2015). For a recent examination of British planning of the Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaign more broadly, see Robin Prior, *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

of the navy, displacing both Fisher and the Chief of the Naval Staff in the process.

Fisher was concerned by what he saw as the weakening of naval forces in the decisive theatre of the North Sea and the other Sea Lords shared his concern. As the landings at Gallipoli were checked, Fisher stepped up his opposition to the operation. At the War Council meeting of 14 May 1915, Fisher stated directly to the leaders of the British government his objections to the Dardanelles operation and said he had been against it from the beginning. Churchill then defended the operation in the Dardanelles, "but it was readily clear to all present that a deep...fissure existed between Fisher and Churchill over the operation" (p. 376). Fisher walked out of the Admiralty the next day, writing resignation letters to Churchill and Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. Gough does an excellent job carefully tracing Fisher's actions during these critical days when he refused to return to the Admiralty in spite of a direct order from the Prime Minister to do so. Gough rightfully condemns the manner of Fisher's exit from the Admiralty as irresponsible. Fisher's resignation also set in motion the events that would lead to Churchill's removal as First Lord and a new coalition government.

Gough's book makes important modifications to the story of Churchill and especially Fisher. His even-handed treatment of both men shows both at their best and worst, and Gough praises and criticises in equal measure in this balanced portrayal of each man. One or two factual errors aside, the only weaknesses in the book are a lack of a more thorough discussion of the RN's culture during the early twentieth century and the links between that culture and the wider world of the British Empire, though the latter is covered in some detail by Gough's own *Pax Britannica* (2014). However, these concerns do not substantially diminish the value of this book as a work of immense scholarship.

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