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Review of "Genesis of the Grand Fleet: The Admiralty, Germany, and the Home Fleet, 1896-1914" by Christopher M. Buckey

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Christopher M. Buckey. *Genesis of the Grand Fleet: The Admiralty, Germany, and the Home Fleet, 1896-1914*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021. Pp. 392

For anyone writing a book on the Grand Fleet, among their greatest challenges is that of finding space for their contribution on bookshelves that are already overflowing with histories and personal accounts about it and its performance in the First World War.¹ By contrast, its predecessor, the Home Fleet, has received far less attention from scholars, despite the important role it played in developing the force that was ready for action on when Britain declared war in August 1914. For that reason alone, Christopher Buckey's history of the origin and evolution of the Home Fleet is a noteworthy addition to the scholarship. Rather than simply treating the history of the prewar Royal Navy as a prologue to its wartime activities, Buckey describes the decisions made by the civilian and uniformed leaders of the British Admiralty that transformed an imperial defence force spread across the world into a single fleet that at the outbreak of the war was "the most powerful armada yet assembled" (p. 248).

As Buckey makes clear, that armada was not a sudden creation, but the cumulative product of years of discussions, debates and quarrels over the future of the Royal Navy. This reflects his view of the navy as a dynamic organisation that was adapting constantly to shifting geopolitical conditions and technological changes. While giving due credit to Sir John Fisher for his zealous pursuit of innovation, he avoids a Fisher-centric narrative by featuring the role played by others in the Royal Navy's leadership. Where the various figures involved often differed was in terms of their assessment of the nature of the threats faced by the Royal Navy during the period and the best means of dealing with them, a calculation that was also influenced by the unceasing demand for economy from civilian leaders in an era of increasing naval expenditures. As Buckey notes, it was the latter which was key to Fisher's selection as First Sea Lord

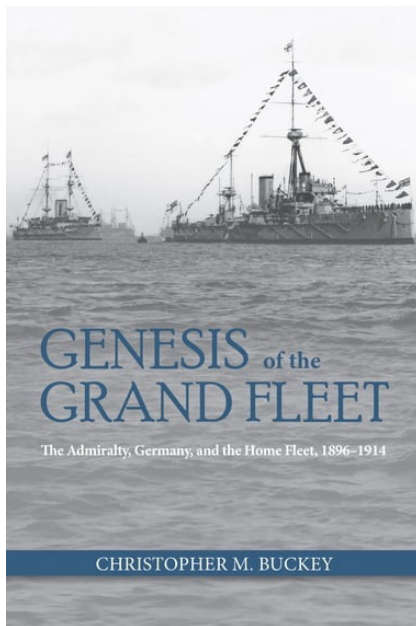
¹ Among the most notable of these works are John Jellicoe's *The Grand Fleet, 1914-1916: Its Creation Development and Work* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1919), the five-volume official history, *History of the Great War: Naval Operation, based on Official Documents* by Julian Corbett and Henry Newbolt (New York and London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1920-31), and Arthur Marder's five-volume series *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1961-70).

in 1904, as his pledge to prune back the number of ships in order to make room for new growth was part of his appeal.

This demand for economy only grew when the Liberal government of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman succeeded Arthur Balfour's Unionist government in December 1905. With the new financial pressure for old age pensions and other social reforms that came with this change, Fisher and his new First Lord, Lord Tweedmouth, faced pressures to find additional savings at a time when Fisher's expensive new warship designs, particularly the dreadnought and the battlecruiser, were under development. Building upon a withdrawal of battleships from the China Station, in August 1906 Fisher

proposed a fleet redistribution in which the Mediterranean and Atlantic fleets were reduced in size in favor of the Channel Fleet and the creation of a new force, which Fisher named the Home Fleet, comprised of reserve vessels and battleships withdrawn from other commands. As a response to the emergence of the Imperial German Navy as the foremost threat facing Britain's naval supremacy, the reorganisation promised to maintain the Royal Navy's advantage as economically as possible.

Such an arrangement was determined to be practicable by the 1906 naval manoeuvres, which demonstrated that these "nucleoid" ships were generally efficient and could be quickly manned in a crisis" (p. 42). Buckey features prominently in his book the role played by war planning in the development of the home fleet, as he recounts the various exercises undertaken by the Navy throughout the period and how the conclusions they drew from them shaped its emergence. This was no easy task, for as he notes throughout the text many of the records of Admiralty manoeuvres during this period were culled in succeeding decades, leaving only fragmentary materials from which to reconstruct what took place. Yet doing so is vital to his description of how they shaped ideas as to what sort of fleet was needed and how it could be best employed in the event of war. As he demonstrates,



the role of an "observational" blockade in any conflict with Germany remained the major focus of naval planning for much of the period, reflecting a consistent strategic vision that embodied the Admiralty's persistent desire to bring the full weight of British naval power to bear against them.

Yet as consistent as such a vision was, the planning for it was haphazard throughout much of the period. This was because of the lack of a naval staff organisation, which successive naval lords resisted implementing. The absence of one complicates Buckey's efforts to reconstruct war planning as much as the pruning of Admiralty files inhibits his efforts to describe naval manoeuvres during the period. While the Naval Intelligence Department undertook many of the functions performed by a staff during this period, it was only with the departure of Arthur Wilson, Fisher's successor as First Sea Lord, in 1911, that a true naval staff was developed that could support operational preparations. Here the author gives considerable credit to Winston Churchill, whose forceful personality makes him a prominent figure in Buckey's text. Like Fisher, Churchill was appointed to his position by virtue of his record as an economiser, and like Fisher his administrative style led to several personality clashes. Yet Buckey give considerable credit to both Francis Bridgeman and Prince Louis of Battenberg for their success as First Sea Lords. In particular, he acknowledges their respective roles in developing the plans that abandoned the increasingly unworkable observational blockade in favor of combining in wartime the smaller flotillas with the battle fleet into a single force that became the fulcrum of naval activity throughout the First World War, even if that activity failed to result in the decisive naval battle expected by many.

That such a weapon was forged so successfully is even more remarkable when set against the factionalism and petty in-fighting that Buckey recounts throughout his text. Often the squabbles between Fisher, Lord Charles Beresford and their respective supporters distracted from these reform efforts to the point of potentially derailing them. Buckey attributes their success in no small measure to the underappreciated efforts of figures whom he regards as unfairly neglected or dismissed by scholars, such as Francis Bridgeman and George Callaghan. He supports his revisionist analysis with a considerable amount of archival research, which he situates squarely within the current historical scholarship on his subject. While this occasionally turns his text into an arbitration of historiographical

debates that betrays its origins as a doctoral dissertation, this does nothing to detract from its usefulness for students of his subject. For anyone with an interest in the history of the Royal Navy, the pre-First World War development of British strategic policy, or the history of the Grand Fleet, this is a book they will want to have on their shelves to supplement the classic works by Arthur Marder, Ruddock Mackay and others on whom Buckey builds his own contribution to the field.

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