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Christopher M. Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xvi, 429. ISBN 978-0-19-969357-3.

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What more can be said about Winston Churchill, almost fifty years after his death? Quite a bit, it turns out, particularly from a naval perspective. The man who signed his personal messages to President Roosevelt during World War II “former naval person” was well entitled to so characterize himself, having served as First Lord of the Admiralty at the outset of both world wars. He actively involved himself in strategic naval planning and, more than most first lords, operational details. Christopher Bell (Dalhousie Univ.) has now produced a well documented study of this facet of Churchill’s career.¹

The book will appeal to both military scholars and serious amateurs. Bell carefully mines official records as well as personal letters and diaries in an even-handed account of the Royal Navy’s last great naval warlord. The broad outlines of Churchill’s career and personality are well established: he was an unreconstructed imperialist, whose worldview was shaped by England at its zenith in the Victorian and Edwardian ages. A brilliant, largely self-educated man, he had just enough knowledge and experience of military affairs to be dangerous.

Churchill became First Lord of the Admiralty in 1911 and formed an effective working alliance with the equally brilliant Admiral John (“Jackie”) Fisher, one of the most imaginative naval thinkers of his day. Together they successfully pushed for higher naval budgets to match the German naval construction program. But Churchill also sought to placate the fiscal conservatives in his party by seeking increased capital ship construction in the self-governing dominions and by resisting unrealistic demands for absolute parity with Italy and Austria-Hungary in the Mediterranean, which would have entailed much higher increases in the Navy’s budget. He argued in vain for an “offsetting” naval presence in the Mediterranean, that is, submarines and fast destroyers in lieu of capital ships. The Canadians’ tangled domestic politics frustrated his hopes for their assistance in Dreadnought production.

Although he accomplished much before the Great War, the young Churchill was not the clear-eyed prophet of the late 1930s. His grasp of the German submarine threat to British warships was sound enough, but he did not appreciate the vulnerability of Britain’s seaborne commerce. In a 1913 memorandum, he concurred with his naval staff that “In exceptional cases convoys will, if necessary, be organized under escort,” but also hoped that “this cumbersome and inconvenient measure will not be required” (41-42). He cavalierly dismissed Fisher’s prediction that, in the event of war, Germany would resort to unrestricted submarine warfare in violation of the Geneva Convention: “I do not believe this would ever be done by a civilized power” (42). His hostility to the convoy system persisted even into the first years of the Second World War, despite its successes in the First. This shortsightedness stemmed from a lack of interest in using the Royal Navy to wage passive, “economic warfare” against Germany. Before and during both world wars, he forcefully advocated using the fleet to wage direct offensive warfare—with impractical and even foolish expectations of what might be achieved.

Churchill was driven from office in 1915 by public outrage over the Gallipoli disaster, a historical verdict that recent scholarship has somewhat watered down. As Bell makes clear, Churchill raised no serious objections to a plan to force the Dardanelles using old battleships not needed in the North Sea blockade of the German High Seas Fleet. He was only one among many senior politicians and military officers who believed such a campaign would yield real strategic benefits. He did himself no credit, however, by dismissing Admiralty reservations about entering the narrows and, more seriously, “failed to convey the full range of Admiralty opinion to the War Council” (74). The miserable failure of the naval attack in the Dardanelles (March

1. He is also the author of *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 2000).

1915) should have terminated the operation, but Churchill “was by temperament probably the least likely member of the War Council to contemplate withdrawal” (74). The Council’s subsequent decision to dispatch troops to support the operation set the stage for catastrophe. Churchill recognized the danger of the escalation, but, like many in British military circles, he held the Turkish Army in very low regard—a fatal strategic error.

In any event, Churchill considered the Dardanelles campaign an “interim operation” (62) and was far more committed to using the Royal Navy for close operations off the German coast, including the seizure of an offshore island as a base for raids and penetrating the Baltic with strong surface forces. The professional naval staff judged that prosecuting such plans, despite their strategic potential, would cause disasters that would put those of the Dardanelles campaign in the shade. Fortunately, Churchill’s removal as First Lord of the Admiralty scuttled these schemes and spared him further embarrassment. Despite his strategic misconceptions and tendency to exceed his authority by ignoring the naval chain of command, he had been a forceful presence at the Admiralty and an energetic and valuable political spokesman for the Royal Navy.

Bell next shows that Churchill, as Chancellor of the Exchequer during the 1920s, was a zealous guardian of the public fisc, strongly resisting the Navy’s ship construction demands, which he rightly considered excessive and unviable. Still, he observes, the Conservative government in which Churchill served spent more on the Royal Navy than did the Labour governments that preceded and followed it. During this period, however, Churchill exhibited strategic myopia; from the 1920s to the first years of World War II, he regarded the Japanese threat to England’s far east colonial and dominion interests as a uniquely British concern. The existence of the US Navy did not at all enter into his calculations of the number of warships needed to protect those interests. According to War Cabinet minutes of fall 1940, he mused that “At the end of the war [in Europe] we should be faced with the formidable task of clearing up the situation in the Far East, and we should be unequal to that task if we fell behind Japan in capital ship construction” (201). The brief Anglo-American rivalry of the 1920s, manifested in bitter disputes over naval arms limitations, had a far more lasting effect on Churchill than on American policymakers, who disregarded any British naval threat and focused on their emerging rival across the Pacific. Bruising arguments with the Americans over naval limitations never shook Churchill’s unwarranted conviction that England would inevitably remain the world’s preeminent naval power.

Appointed First Lord of the Admiralty again after the outbreak of war in 1939, Churchill underestimated the danger of German submarines, but the *Kriegsmarine*’s misplaced priorities minimized its threat during the first year of the war. As he had in 1914, Churchill wildly overrated the Royal Navy’s offensive potential against Germany. In the early months of World War II, he astonishingly revived his scheme to put a strong British surface task force into the Baltic, using older battleships. Fortunately, the First Sea Lord (Dudley Pound) and the naval staff, supported by others in the government, quashed such a risky operation. Churchill had seriously misjudged both the difficulty of penetrating the Baltic narrows and the subsequent vulnerability of a British squadron lacking air cover.

Churchill was on firmer strategic ground in focusing, like many in the government, on economic objectives in the opening months of the war. German industry was critically dependent on iron ore mined in northern Sweden and shipped south either through the Gulf of Bothnia and the Baltic Sea (from spring through fall), or sent by rail to the all-weather port of Narvik in northern Norway and then shipped south through Norwegian coastal waters. Interdicting this vital traffic was a high priority for the British, as were secondary schemes, like disrupting Germany’s wartime economy by mining the upper Rhine River. The latter initiative never came to fruition, owing to French timidity, but the ultimate failure of the Allies’ operations in Norway can be laid in part at Churchill’s feet.

As Bell clarifies, Churchill was one of the few who realized that the correct objectives in early 1940 were capturing Narvik and stopping Swedish iron ore exports to Germany. But half-measures like mining Norwegian coastal waters were opposed by the Norwegian government and, worse, tipped off the Germans as to what was coming. The Allies—particularly, the Royal Navy—utterly failed to foresee or effectively counter the swift German naval campaign against Norway in April 1940, a strategic miscalculation on a par with

Pearl Harbor. To his credit, Churchill pushed for a quick reaction to the Narvik occupation, which eventually succeeded in destroying the entire German task force of destroyers and transports and, for a time, expelling German mountain troops from Narvik itself. But he could not prevent his exuberant colleagues in the War Cabinet from dissipating British and French strength in a futile effort to occupy Trondheim and other ports in central Norway. In retrospect, even Narvik could not have been held after the astonishing German campaign in western Europe; still, “Churchill was the only member of the War Cabinet to keep his eyes on the prize” (193).

Churchill as Prime Minister is often blamed for the destruction of “Force Z”—the battleship *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser *Repulse*, dispatched in late 1941 to Singapore to signal British determination to resist Japanese moves toward Malaya and the Indian Ocean. The Admiralty firmly opposed sending two valuable ships so far into eastern waters, when they were needed to contain the three German fast battleships able to threaten North Atlantic convoy routes. The First Sea Lord and most of the naval staff favored assembling a force of five to seven older battleships with modest carrier support to be based in the Indian Ocean. This was eventually done, albeit to no avail when the Japanese First Air Fleet came barreling into the Indian Ocean in April 1942. Still, Bell points out, the decision to send *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to Singapore even against the advice of the naval staff was, for political reasons, strongly supported by the Cabinet. Churchill was not alone in failing to recognize that the ships would have no deterrent effect whatever on the Japanese. The sinking of both vessels by air attack on 10 December 1941 was the fault of the Force Z commander, Vice Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, who unwisely sortied from Singapore to intercept Japanese amphibious forces off Malaya without air cover. Churchill, as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence during the previous eighteen months, must share responsibility for the shocking weakness of the RAF in the region.

Churchill and Sea Power provides a balanced view of Churchill’s worst mistakes, documenting his stubborn and ludicrous beliefs about naval strategy in both World Wars. Specific errors, besides those already mentioned, include his decision to attack the Free French forces in Oran and Dakar in 1940, completely misapprehending the military threat posed by Vichy France. His overconfidence in special operations also deserves criticism, as does his choice of Lord Louis Mountbatten—a naval officer of distinguished pedigree but undistinguished war record—as head of Combined Operations. (Fortunately, Mountbatten “failed upward” to become an effective Commander in Chief in Southeast Asia.)

While Churchill had foreseen early in his career that capital ships would soon lose their dominance to the combination of submarines and airpower, like most naval officers, he did not anticipate just how soon. Bell does credit him with early advocacy of airpower in warfare—he gave primacy to the RAF over the Royal Navy as rearmament eventually got under way in the late 1930s. But his nearly unconditional support of Bomber Command led him to resist for too long reallocating long-range bombers to help the Navy in its bitter antisubmarine campaign during 1942–44.

In a fine summary essay, “Epilogue: The Verdict of History,” Bell deals fairly with the postwar reputation of The Great Man, judiciously refuting his most strident critics.² All things considered, the Royal Navy owes Winston Churchill a substantial debt. Although, as the century progressed, “air power gradually eclipsed sea power as Britain’s most potent and valuable weapon, ... Churchill ensured that the Navy’s most important needs were met” (341). As both First Lord and Prime Minister, the man was prone to excessive meddling in operational matters and promoted harebrained schemes, but he also listened to and sometimes heeded senior officers who stood firm against his strident personality and formidable intellect. Readers of Christopher Bell’s meticulously researched, clearly written book will gain a far more nuanced appreciation of an undeniably great figure in modern military history.

2. See, e.g., *The Navy and Defence: The Autobiography of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield*, vol. 2: *It Might Happen Again* (London: Heinemann, 1947), and Stephen W. Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals* (NY: Morrow, 1978).