



Jutland a Century On

Jutland: The Unfinished Battle: A Personal History of a Naval Controversy

by Nick Jellicoe.

Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2016. Pp. 352. ISBN 978-1-84832-321-6.

The Battle of Jutland by John Brooks.

New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016. Pp. xx, 571. ISBN 978-1-107-15014-0.

Review by Jonathan Beard, New York City (jb752@caa.columbia.edu).

The summer of 2016 saw the 100th anniversary of the battle of Jutland, the only large-scale naval battle fought in World War I. Two new histories of the battle have joined the dozens published since the dreadnoughts of the Kaiser's High Seas Fleet and the British Grand Fleet returned to port on 1 June 1916. *Jutland: The Unfinished Battle* and *The Battle of Jutland* reach similar conclusions but differ sharply in style and will appeal to different audiences.

Nick Jellicoe, a career advertising man, writes in homage to his grandfather, Adm. Sir John Jellicoe, commander of the Grand Fleet at Jutland. His very readable, well documented account reflects years of research into the men and women who played roles in both the battle and the often vicious, decades-long controversy that followed it. The author sometimes descends into gossip and sentimentality, but also at least touches on even very technical issues regarding the ships and how they fought.

John Brooks is not an academic historian, either, but has written a doctoral dissertation on battle-ship gunnery.¹ *The Battle of Jutland* is meant to be the definitive book on its subject, based on meticulous examination of official records and the vast secondary literature on the battle. Unfortunately, its gray prose and clumsy rendering of time and directions make it hard to follow the action. Specialist readers, however, will find it to be the most detailed account of Jutland yet available.

Nick Jellicoe begins by telling the stories of the two men who created the fleets that fought at Jutland. Adm. John "Jacky" Fisher fashioned a new navy by building first HMS *Dreadnought* and then the battlecruisers that scouted ahead of the fleet. His counterpart, Großadmiral Alfred von Tirpitz, faced a greater challenge: assembling its first ocean-going navy for the young German Empire. Jellicoe describes the arms race that resulted from the efforts of these two men and then moves to the four admirals who were at sea on 30 May: for the British, John Jellicoe and David Beatty, for the Germans, Reinhard Scheer and Franz Hipper. Much of the book, however, concerns the rivalry between Jellicoe and Beatty, which long outlived the men themselves. The following typifies Jellicoe's often gratingly chatty style of presentation.

Beatty's affair with Ethel Tree was conducted with great caution. Signing his letters to her from China "Jack," he waited patiently while her divorce from Arthur Tree was in progress. Despite considerable opposition from within Beatty's family, from his father and even his sister "Trot," who felt the move could damage his career, the two, David aged thirty and Ethel aged twenty-seven, married on 22 May 1901 at

1. "Fire Control for British Dreadnoughts: Choices in Technology and Supply" (King's College London, 2001), the basis of *Dreadnought Gunnery and the Battle of Jutland: The Question of Fire Control* (NY: Routledge, 2005).

Hanover Square registry office, just ten days after Ethel's divorce had come through. In so readily agreeing to it, she had not contested Arthur's accusations of adultery and on that basis lost custody of their son, Ronald. On the Tree side of the family it was the same—it was some time before Ronald was reconciled with Beatty. Eventually he became a great admirer. (55)

Jellicoe takes an obsessive, tiresome interest in appearances and personalities, down to the repeatedly mentioned number of brass buttons on Admiral Beatty's jacket. Beatty's good looks and brashness may have furthered his career, but they did not cause the loss of his battlecruisers.

By contrast, Brooks opens with three densely informative chapters: "Building the Battlefleets," "Technologies," and "Orders for Battle." The first offers a thorough comparison of the battleships, battlecruisers, cruisers, and destroyers in each navy, as they were added to their respective fleets. There follow thirteen pages of tables recapitulating the growth of the two fleets. The second chapter treats two issues—signals and gunnery—critical to the battle, especially in Brooks's telling of the story. Jutland caught the Royal Navy at an awkward moment in the evolution of its communications systems. Though all their warships carried radios, the British were reluctant to use them because they could be jammed or, worse, their messages intercepted. (Both books describe British intercepts and decipherments of German radio signals.) Signals could also be sent by light, but these, too, could be seen and intercepted. In the end, most of the vessels at Jutland used signal flags, as they had been a century earlier at Trafalgar, where Nelson commanded twenty-seven ships within a few hundred yards of each other. Many of the delays and confusions at Jutland were due to using this obsolete system on a misty day, amid coal- and gun-smoke, as the sun was setting.

In his excellent discussion of gunnery, Brooks addresses three problems that led to British failures at Jutland. First, although battleship guns could fire at ranges of ten miles, British rangefinders and fire-control instruments were unsatisfactory. Worse, as Jellicoe himself knew as early as 1910, British armor-piercing shells were unreliable: in the battle, the vast majority burst on impact before penetrating armor. And, worst of all, explosions of poorly stored cordite propellant that the big guns used inflicted most of the British casualties, which were double the German losses.

The battle of Jutland began when the two scouting forces—Hipper's battlecruisers and Beatty's battlecruisers and fast battleships—met in the North Sea, south of Norway and west of Denmark. Each side succeeded in drawing the other toward its own main fleet. Disastrously, however, Beatty and his men did not deploy their ships correctly and their gunnery was very poor. The smaller German force, on the other hand, shot quite well: their hits on the turrets of British battlecruisers ignited cordite fires that spread to magazines, causing the *Indefatigable*, the *Queen Mary*, and the *Invincible* to explode and sink, with the loss of over three thousand men. Both books explain that British insistence on rapid fire required too much cordite to be piled in the turrets and that magazine doors were left open. In addition, the German shells performed as designed, piercing armor and then detonating. German protection of both their propellant and ships was far superior.

Two hours after the battlecruiser action began, the two main fleets met—to the great shock of Admiral Scheer, who had no idea the Grand Fleet was at sea. Admiral Jellicoe's much larger force (151 ships vs. 99) pounded the lead German battleships for several minutes, until Scheer made emergency turns to escape. When Scheer sent his battlecruisers and destroyers to attack the British, Jellicoe turned away in fear of German torpedoes. As darkness fell, the main fleets lost contact and the High Seas Fleet ran for home. Throughout the night, there were sharp encounters between the fleets—mostly destroyers and cruisers, though one old German battleship was torpedoed and sunk—while Admiral Jellicoe steamed south, unwittingly allowing the Germans to reach safety. He had received precious little information from the British ships that had engaged the enemy and was unready for a night action.

As may be seen in the following passage, Brooks technical prose makes for hard reading:

At 7.00, Jellicoe had received Beatty's signal "Enemy are to Westward" but, since the BCF was not then in touch, this can only have been a delayed and incomplete version of *Falmouth's* report of 6.45. However the enemy line was not completely invisible; at 6.55, as they turned S, *St Vincent* and *Revenge* had sighted German capital ships and both probably opened fire soon afterwards; *Neptune* did likewise at about 7.04. None of these ships sent a report to the C-in-C, but the sound of salvos from the 1BS can only have confirmed the impression given by Goodenough's signal that the enemy was again closing in. At 7.06, "the whole battle line was turned together three more points to starboard to close the range further". These turns by Blue Pendant to SWbyS formed the ships of each division on a line-of-bearing N, a disposition in which station keeping was more difficult than in line astern. Even as *Iron Duke* turned, she had a target in view and her turrets then trained to pick up the left-hand ship on a forward bearing of G28. (317)

Several things stand out: Brooks reports time using a 12-hour clock, not the standard military 24-hour clock.² The sentence beginning "These turns by Blue Pendant..." is almost impenetrable, despite a long discussion of signal flags and maneuvering earlier in the book. Brooks also uses two bearing systems: the flag signal called for a turn to Southwest by South, and the guns of the *Iron Duke* were pointed on a bearing of "G28," that is, Green 28, or 28 degrees to starboard, while G90 would be pointing to a target broadside to the ship. The 290 pages on the actual combat feature many tables of signals between ships, but only six (mediocre) maps. (Jellicoe provides sixteen pages of photographs and paintings; Brooks none at all.)

By the afternoon of 1 June, both fleets, except for a few damaged vessels, were back in port, and the recrimination and finger-pointing in Great Britain had begun. Both books conduct postmortems of the battle. Brooks reviews technology and tactics in a long chapter on what went wrong in British ships, with special attention to signaling. Admiral Jellicoe had been in the dark much of the time and did not learn about the destruction of Beatty's battlecruisers until he returned to port. During most of the action, especially the night fighting when Scheer cut across his fleet's wake to escape, he had no idea where the German ships were.

Brooks's book ends with the battle, but Nick Jellicoe tells the story of the rest of World War I at sea, claiming that the German fleet's narrow escape at Jutland led directly to unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917. The High Seas Fleet was mostly confined to harbor for the remainder of the war and its poorly fed sailors mutinied two weeks before the armistice that ended the war. After the armistice, the German dreadnoughts steamed into Scapa Flow, the Grand Fleet's base, to surrender. They were eventually scuttled by their crews. Jellicoe ends his book with a long chapter titled "The Controversy: An Unfinished Battle"—essentially a survey of the unpleasant history of books on Jutland, most of them partisan, and many blaming either Admiral Jellicoe or David Beatty for both the poor performance of British ships and letting the German fleet escape destruction. This is another quite personal section; it ends with Nick Jellicoe's father marching behind Admiral Jellicoe's coffin at his funeral in 1935.

Jutland remains a thorny subject. Both books debate the historical question "who won the battle?" The British, with their centuries of naval dominance, their tradition of Nelsonian élan, and their larger, newer, and better armed fleet, nonetheless returned home with heavy losses and no victory. Yet Scheer and Hipper, whose warships had acquitted themselves so well, never again sought battle with the Grand Fleet. Despite the costly prewar arms race of the Dreadnought era, the Great War would be decided on land.

2. In addition, he punctuates hours and minutes with a period (e.g., 7.00 pm) rather than using a colon (7:00 pm) or the hundred system (1900).