



*The Royal Navy: A History since 1900* by Duncan Redford and Philip D. Grove.

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Review by Rotem Kowner, University of Haifa (kowner@research.haifa.ac.il).

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If battles, drama, and glory constitute naval history, the chronicles of the British Royal Navy (hereafter, “the Navy”) are without rivals. Between c. 1700 and 1940, it was globally preeminent in power and size, as well as innovation, strategy, and tactics, a phenomenal record given that standing naval forces emerged only in the late sixteenth century. That Navy’s post-1900 history is the subject of the book under review here. It was a period of formidable challenges, continual change, and ultimate decline.

By 1900, the Navy was still maintaining the “two-power” standard formally adopted by an act of Parliament in 1889, stipulating that it be as strong as the next two navies (viz., at the time, the French and Russian) combined. Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee Review of the Fleet in 1897 provided an awe-inspiring display of naval power, as 165 warships, (including twenty-one battleships and forty-four cruisers), assembled in the narrow waters of Spithead. On the eve of World War II, Britain still possessed over fourteen hundred vessels, including more battleships and aircraft carriers than any of its rivals.

In 1966, Britain canceled an order for a large new aircraft carrier and within several years, lacking any capital ships, could no longer play any substantial role in global affairs other than as a NATO member. By the end of the twentieth century, the Navy was a mere shadow of its glorious past. When Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her Diamond Jubilee in 2012, no fleet review on the scale of Victoria’s could even be contemplated. The US Navy is about ten times larger in aggregate tonnage than the present-day Royal Navy, which is smaller even than the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.

In *The Royal Navy: A History since 1900*, naval historians Duncan Redford (Nat’l. Museum of the Royal Navy) and Philip D. Grove (Britannia Royal Naval College and Univ. of Plymouth) attempt to survey the complex history of the twentieth-century Navy in less than four hundred pages.<sup>1</sup>

The book’s ten chapters (plus introduction and epilogue) proceed chronologically through the pre-World War II era (125 pages), the War itself (88 pages), and the postwar era (88 pages). The discussion of the pre-First World War years (chaps. 1–4) focuses on the Navy’s involvement in the Boer War; Adm. John Fisher’s reforms; the impact of new technologies (submarines, wireless communications, steam turbine engines, and the building of dreadnoughts and battlecruisers); and the sudden rise of Germany as Britain’s main naval rival. Succeeding chapters sketch naval operations shortly after the outbreak of the Great War; the Battle of Jutland; the naval blockades of Germany and Britain; and the development of airpower. The book then examines the postwar demobilization, naval arms limitation, new technologies, and eventual rearmament.

The three World War II chapters concern, first, the initial war at sea up to the fall of France, the Battle of Britain, and the Arctic convoys; second, the Battle of the Atlantic (a particularly fine analysis); and, third, the Navy’s actions in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific.

The final three chapters address the Navy’s swift decline from 1945 to 9/11: the Korean War, the Suez Crisis of 1956, the dramatic cuts to the military budget under Prime Minister Denis Healey, the

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1. Redford wrote the chapters on the events of 1900–1945, Grove the chapters on the postwar period.

Falklands War, Operation Desert Shield, and the Balkans conflict. A nine-page epilogue traces developments in the Navy up to 2012.

Throughout the book, the authors manage to convey the personal side of principal figures, especially commanders. Their text also features thirteen instructive tables and over sixty superb photographs, some full-color. The following passage on the British humiliation at the hands of the Japanese early in the Pacific War gives a sense of the authors' lucid, jargon-free prose:

Fundamentally, the British naval problem from 1939 to 1941 was how to deter Japan from entering the war rather than getting ready to fight her. Unfortunately, deterrence was not just a naval problem but a political one. It was Churchill and his Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, who forced the Admiralty to dispatch the new battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and the veteran battlecruiser HMS *Repulse*—Force Z—in October 1941 to Singapore to act as the deterrent force they felt was needed, against the wishes of the Admiralty who instead wanted to establish a balanced fleet by March 1942. Force Z arrived in Singapore on 2 December 1941, the day the Japanese decided on war. Deterrence had failed. (212)

While some may disagree with certain of the authors' specific assertions (e.g., regarding a British tactical victory at Jutland), this is to be expected in a calculatedly succinct historical narrative spanning c. 112 years. That said, the book sometimes reads like an uncritical official history, inattentive to the larger political, economic, and technological background of the decision-making that led the Navy through its various transitions and eventual decline.<sup>2</sup> Sorely missed, too, is a concluding chapter summing up what has preceded or underscoring major shifts and trends in a sweeping diachronic survey. Despite these shortcomings, however, *The Royal Navy: A History since 1900* will engage and inform both novice and specialist readers desiring an accessible and vivid big-picture account of its subject.

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2. Cf., among others, Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (NY: Scribner, 1976).