



Disciplining the Empire: Politics, Governance, and the Rise of the British Navy by Sarah Kinkel.

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Historian Sarah Kinkel (Ohio Univ.) has written an important study of the eighteenth-century Royal Navy in its ideological context, aligning political and cultural history in the process.

This book focuses on the relationship between the political ideologies of the eighteenth-century British Empire, the form and function of the British navy, and the structure of imperial governance. Questioning political commitments is crucial to assessing Britain's changing naval fortunes during the eighteenth century. (9)

Though the broad trajectory of the rise of British naval power has often been described, Kinkel makes innovative use of the Navy as a lens through which to gain new insights into contemporary attitudes towards the military, society, and empire.

The book opens with a review of England's naval operations in the seventeenth-century, a period that saw significant developments. Merchant ships became increasingly obsolete in naval warfare as warship-design facilitated greater fire power and naval commanders adopted the "line of battle" as a key battle tactic. Kinkel then turns to imperial and naval policy under Robert Walpole's administration (1721-42), clearly showing that "the early Augustan navy was not the undisputed powerhouse that some contemporaries and historians have claimed it to be" (85). This leads neatly into a chapter on criticism of the Navy during the 1740s and the resulting naval reform which produced a more professionalized service.

In a chapter on the Seven Years War (1756-63), Kinkel sheds light on the role of the reformed navy, revealing the ambivalent British attitudes toward colonial expansion. Turning to colonial perspectives on the Navy, she describes the impact of the Seven Years War on the American colonies, India, the Caribbean, and Ireland, tracing the resentment the Navy encountered and sometimes provoked.

A concluding chapter on the American Revolutionary War (1775-83) argues that Britain's loss of the American colonies was not inevitable but the result of strategic failures. The book will therefore appeal to readers interested in American colonial as well as British history.

In her introduction, Kinkel takes pains to set out the questions at the core of her investigation of the rise of British naval power:

If naval success was not a foregone conclusion, then when did Britain's naval ascendancy begin? If there was not consensus over the form and function of the British navy, then what were the lines of rupture, and what were the political stakes? If much of Britain's eventual success on the seas can be traced to the actions of committed, disciplined, and aggressive sea officers, then where did these qualities come from, and why were those same officers reviled by some contemporaries as pirates? In short, why did Britain become the world's most dominant naval power? (2)

In building her case, the author sometimes overstates her argument that the Navy was the subject of fundamental political discord in British life. She argues that historians have claimed

that any controversy about naval power in Britain was only at a “surface” level and that deep down everybody supported it. In disputing the supposedly overwhelming political support for the Navy, she appears to misconstrue “parliamentary consensus” to mean there were no dissenting voices. Indeed, she herself states that, because the Navy came under parliamentary authority and the army remained a royal prerogative, it “was seen as a symbol of national liberty rather than a symbol of authoritarian central power” (5).

Other interpretations lack nuance. For example, Kinkel asks, “Did the British Empire have a maritime destiny? If so, it was not obvious before the eighteenth century, when there were clear transformations in both quantitative and qualitative assessments of British naval power” (3). Strictly speaking, it is true that Britain’s naval superiority was not physically evident until the eighteenth century. Yet the existence of popular opinion regarding a British maritime destiny—however much that might have been wishful thinking—is certainly apparent already in the seventeenth century, when the Rump Parliament and Cromwell built up a powerful naval force.

In the bulk of her volume, the author successfully integrates naval concerns into a larger imperial framework and shows the global implications of parliamentary decisions about the Navy. On one level, this is obvious: the policies of an emerging and then supreme naval power surely had global implications. Yet Kinkel is the first to concentrate on this specific aspect of British naval and imperial history. In particular, she shows that the reforms of the 1740s were contested and linked to wider concerns about the decay of British society and the status of Britain internationally. This means that disputes during the American Revolutionary War about such topics as obedience and the constitution had deeper roots.

Kinkel exhibits a firm grasp of volatile factional politics, clarifying the twists and turns of political debate concisely and with verve. She also elucidates the mercantile background where necessary, for example, outlining the friction between Spanish *guarda costas* and British traders in the light of widespread smuggling into Spanish colonies. She offers refreshing and keen insights into attitudes toward the Navy on both sides of the Atlantic, demonstrating that it could be, like war itself, both a divisive and a unifying force in society.

There are minor slips: Samuel Pepys rose to be Secretary to the Admiralty, but when naval officers swore Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy on the Restoration of Charles II, he was merely Clerk of the Acts to the Navy Board. And maritime districts north of the Thames were not called “Docklands” until the twentieth century.

Such rare slips aside, this impressively researched book makes judicious use of varied sources to give its readers a new understanding of its subject. In addition, five black-and-white illustrations of contemporary prints, some rarely reproduced, support the author’s arguments. Regrettably, the book lacks a bibliography.

Sarah Kinkel concludes that the Royal Navy was “a mirror for imperial society” (217) at the center of debate over the proper ends of imperial power, its impact on civilian society, and the nature of the wider empire. It is good to be reminded, in this excellent account, that the route to Britain’s maritime supremacy was neither uncontested nor inevitable.