



Dreadnought: The Ship That Changed the World by Roger Parkinson.

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

Dreadnought is not the story of the HMS *Dreadnought*, a British battleship launched in 1906, though it describes why and how that ship was built. It is, rather, a history of the advances in naval technology between 1890 and 1920 and their military and political effects on countries around the world. The book appears to be an update of Roger Parkinson's *The Late Victorian Navy*.¹ He concentrates on the political side of naval history, exploring how the Royal Navy and British government created a fleet based on pre-dreadnought battleships between 1890 and 1905, and how the launching of the *Dreadnought* triggered a naval arms race with Imperial Germany. He describes how admirals like Sir John "Jacky" Fisher in Britain and Alfred von Tirpitz in Germany struggled or connived with prime ministers, chancellors, kings, and Kaisers to build ever-larger ships, almost bankrupting their nations in the process.

Parkinson gives a colorful account of Fisher's quarrels with officers and politicians as he became, for better and worse, chief architect of the Grand Fleet that fought at Jutland. Similarly, he tells how Kaiser Wilhelm II enrolled in the arms race leading up to the Great War. The following typifies his lively, somewhat gossipy narrative style.

For whatever reasons—his disability, his alienation from his parents, particularly his English mother, and coping with the rigours of Prussian military life—at a psychological level, Kaiser Bill was a highly-strung character. His acute nervousness might be better described as neurasthenic. He can be seen to best advantage on his yacht *Hohenzollern*, built in the second year of his reign for 4.5 million Goldmarks. (112)

Though the author is too preoccupied with personalities and petty disputes, this section of his book clarifies the party politicking and budget deals behind the financing of these enormously expensive ships.

The treatment here of the technological aspects of the arms race is less detailed and rather hit-and-miss. Parkinson highlights certain factors that transformed navies in his target period, including improvements in the steel that went into armor, while glossing over, for example, the introduction of turbines and smokeless propellants for the guns. Although he explains that their poorly designed armor-piercing shells cost the British dearly in every major naval battle of the war, he says nothing about the Germans' inability to make effective shells or the tendency of British projectiles to break apart on impact. He does, however, effectively use line drawings and data from various editions of Brassey's *Naval Annual* to detail changes in the size, gun layouts, and armor schemes of warships. But other salient innovations, like the introduction of fuel oil, which caused a crisis for coal-rich, oil-poor Great Britain, are barely mentioned.

Parkinson does discuss the specifics of fire control. As longer-range guns were developed, navies found it much harder to hit moving targets. The author gives a fairly in-depth account of the two fire-control systems—the Dreyer table and the Argo clock designed by Arthur Pollen—considered by the

1. Subtitle: *The Pre-dreadnought Era and the Origins of the First World War* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Pr, 2008), based on the author's 2007 Univ. of Exeter PhD dissertation.

Royal Navy. He also cites statistics showing poor performance of the Navy's guns at the battle of Jutland.

This section exposes a weakness in Parkinson's research. His footnotes and bibliography attest to his good grasp of the relevant literature, both specialist and general, on the technology and tactics of naval warfare in World War I. Regarding political history, he has also consulted pertinent government papers and other primary sources. But he is less conversant with several current scholarly disputes, carried on in dozens of journal articles, concerning the distances at which the Royal Navy intended to engage enemy ships in 1914, the range-finders being used, the proper role of battlecruisers, etc. Parkinson in general relies on older, often classic, histories and memoirs.

The book closes with two chapters—"World War I to Jutland" and "From Jutland to Washington"—on the naval history of the war. The author's judgments here are often peremptory and idiosyncratic. He writes, for instance, that "[Adm. David Richard] Beatty's force was not well deployed [at Jutland] and the Fifth Battle Squadron was some five miles away from the battlecruiser. In the years that followed, endless excuses were made for the dispersion of Beatty's forces but none really work. A Nelson or a Collingwood would automatically have concentrated their [sic] forces" (228). As for Adm. Franz von Hipper, "Apart from Dogger Bank and Jutland, [his] main claim to fame was an ability to bombard the east coast of Britain, which earned him the deserved epithet of 'baby killer'" (238).

Dreadnought is an attractive book, well illustrated with drawings and twenty-six black-and-white photographs. Oddly, Parkinson includes a photo of the German cruiser *Emden* after the Battle of Cocos, which is never mentioned in the text. The book would have benefited from better editing and proofreading as well.²

Roger Parkinson's conclusions about the battles he discusses, the importance of the battleship fleets, and the war at sea in general are sound, if in no way novel. Consequently, *Dreadnought* will better serve beginning students and general readers than specialists in its subject area.

2. E.g., for "SMS *Wein*," read "SMS *Wien*" (26, 306); for "USS *Keasarge*," read "USS *Kearsarge*" (59, 302); for "handing rooms," read "handling rooms" (229). The author appears to think "IJN *He-Yei*" (67) and "IJN *Hiei*" (70, 191, 301) refer to two ships; they are two transliterations of the name of a single vessel.