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The Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in Memory of Bryan Ranft

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Till, Geoffrey, ed. *The Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in Memory of Bryan Ranft*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 214pp. \$125

This collection of nine essays on British naval thought from the eighteenth century to the present is both useful in itself and a fine testimonial to an individual significant in the field of maritime and naval historiography. Bryan Ranft (1917–2003) fought as a gunner in World War II and then went on to teach generations of British naval officers at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, England. For many years Ranft occupied a rather lonely position, academically speaking. Amateur naval historians like Richard Hough abounded but made no impression upon scholarship and methodology. The two modern giants Stephen Roskill and Arthur Marder were for various reasons not equivalent to the likes of Sir Michael Howard in developing military history. Naval matters were hardly taught in the academy; the Vere Harmsworth Chair at Cambridge University (Richmond's former seat) had been long lost to colonial historians, and Greenwich itself was a service institution.

However, Bryan Ranft persisted in teaching, writing, and editing naval history. His output was not great; I count two of his edited works, *The Beatty Papers* and *Technical Change and British Naval Policy, 1860–1939*, among the best of a half-dozen volumes. By the early 1980s, however, Ranft was a visiting professor of naval history at King's College, London, which was among the first of the United Kingdom's academic institutions to recognize the stupidity of ignoring British and international naval history.

Within another fifteen to twenty years this subject would witness an escape from those scholarly doldrums, indeed a serious revival, particularly in such forward-looking universities as Exeter, Southampton, Hull, and London, which were at last recognizing their own cities' deep maritime heritages. Many of the contributors to this volume teach, or have taught, in those very institutions.

Professor Geoffrey Till—in many ways Ranft's natural successor—has edited a tight and coherent Festschrift, which hangs together in large part because all essays concentrate upon naval *thinking* and writing rather than operations or technology. It is difficult, then, to single out for special praise certain contributions, for they range from Nicholas Rodger's chapter on eighteenth-to-nineteenth-century British naval strategic thought to Eric Grove's equivalent piece regarding the close of the twentieth century. Readers might take special interest in the contributions by Jock Gardner and Richard Hill, longtime naval officers become significant authors of maritime and strategic matters.

There is a useful bibliography, but the index is rather thin. However, these days one is grateful to see such an item at all. This is, in sum, a most useful addition (volume 38) to the Cass series on Naval Policy and History, of which Professor Till is the general editor.

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Gilbert, Alton Keith, ed. *A Leader Born*. Drexel Hill, Pa.: Casemate, 2006. 230pp. \$32.95

Alton Keith Gilbert, a retired naval officer, uses a descriptive survey method of research through letters, operational documents, fitness reports, personal accounts, and awards to chronicle the biography of Admiral John “Slew” McCain.

The book builds a strong sense of the character and tenacity of McCain and his ability as a warfighter through one of the most difficult periods of World War II. From his commissioning as an ensign to admiral, McCain was influenced by the Navy’s greatest leaders. The author describes the development of McCain as he progressed through his sea and shore assignments. The study culminates in a detailed description of the war in the Pacific and the tactics used, particularly when dealing with Japanese kamikaze pilots, under McCain’s operational leadership.

An intriguing aspect of this book is the detailed description of the political dealings among the Navy’s senior leaders. This allows the reader to understand some of the activity behind the scenes that ultimately shaped the outcome of the war. It is clear that McCain was a warrior’s warrior who literally worked himself to death: “After Japan surrendered on September 2, 1945, McCain flew back to his home in the U.S. and died in his bed the next day—perhaps from heart failure but more probably from exhaustion.” His dedication to the country, accomplishment of the mission, and loyalty to his superiors are constant themes of the book.

The extensive resources and the author’s personal experience as a naval officer make this a credible, historically accurate work. Gilbert’s style brings to life the experience of the Pacific War. In addition, specific data regarding the

losses of personnel and equipment only enhances the understanding of the impact of that war on both the U.S. and Japanese forces. The bibliography is a great resource for anyone who desires additional information on the topic.

The only criticism I have relates to the title. The book comes up a little short on the actual leadership characteristics of McCain, and I found myself searching for those qualities in his style and character. Yet this is a must-read for anyone who desires to learn about another one of the great admirals of World War II.

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Osborne, Eric W. *The Battle of Heligoland Bight*. Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006. 141pp. \$27.95

Butler, Daniel Allen. *Distant Victory: The Battle of Jutland and the Allied Triumph in the First World War*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2006. 251pp. \$44.95

After two decades of unrelenting publishing on the land war of 1914–18, it is nice to see attention being paid to the war at sea, for that effort ranged from distant blockades, mine warfare, unrestricted submarine warfare, and dashing destroyer melees, to the largest pitched surface fleet battle to that time. Both authors tell their stories with a passion for narrative, paying close attention not only to admirals but also to the “common sailor” at war. Both come well prepared: Osborne, of Virginia Military Institute, has published *Britain’s Economic Blockade of Germany, 1914–1919* (2004) and *Cruisers and Battle Cruisers:*