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Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea

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Massie, Robert K. *Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea*. New York: Random House, 2003. 880pp. \$35

This work is the sequel to Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Massie's *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (Random House, 1991). It is a sweeping narrative of World War I at sea. While it focuses primarily on the struggle between the main German and British fleets, it also examines the German U-boat campaign, other revolutions in undersea weaponry, the pivotal role of good intelligence, and the broad geographic scope of the war. The book provides a clear sense of how important the clash of British and German navies was to the war's eventual outcome, and it illustrates how Winston Churchill's dramatic description of Admiral John Jellicoe, commander in chief of the British Grand Fleet, as "the only commander who could lose the war in an afternoon" could be an accurate one.

This is also a cautionary tale of failures and missed opportunities. In the earliest stages of the conflict, we see both sides baffled when their opponent's actions do not match prewar assumptions. The German naval strategy, for example, was based on the certainty that the British would immediately attack the German fleet or institute a close-in blockade. When this did not happen, Massie writes, "the premise on which the Germans had based their strategy was overturned." Consequently, German admirals "discovered that they did not know what to do." When the German fleet, on the other hand, did not come charging out for a fight, the British public, expecting another Trafalgar,

became annoyed with the navy's "unwillingness" to act. Each side scrambled to formulate a new strategy. There is a clear lesson here—flexibility, not plans set in stone.

The author shows that the most costly strategic failure, however, was the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. By no means is this a groundbreaking interpretation, but in these pages the course of action leading to the decision is made clear. The failure of the vaunted High Seas Fleet to carry out its anticipated task of whittling down the Grand Fleet painted the Germans into a strategic corner from which they eventually saw unrestricted submarine warfare as their only alternative.

Despite these explanations of strategy, *Castles of Steel* is also a readable and dramatic work. The narrative rushes along, with a desperate hunt for the enemy in the vast Pacific, with fleets and squadrons that speed toward each other without a hint of the other's presence, and with battle cruisers that appear out of the mist to shell unsuspecting coastal villages and then slip quietly away. Action in the North Sea, the book's primary theater, culminates in a gripping four-chapter account of Jutland. Meanwhile, the fog of battle makes command and control difficult, even with the new technology of wireless communication. In the words of British admiral David Beatty, the war at sea became "a conflict with the unexpected," despite the best-laid plans. The reader can sense the drama and urgency born of this uncertainty on every page.

Yet while acknowledging the great narrative allure of vast fleets fighting for control of the seas, some readers might question the relevance of such a lengthy analysis. After all, was it not the overall

experience of the First World War that marked the passing of the Mahanian ideal of climactic shoot-outs between battleships and pointed to new realities in naval strategy? Almost from the time the echo of the guns in the North Sea faded, naval strategy shifted to things radically different from decisive battles between capital ships. The strategic framework of *Forward . . . from the Sea* appears to have little in common with Jutland or Dogger Bank.

Nevertheless, the struggle to adapt to this shift is part of the experience we see unfolding in *Castles of Steel*. Jellicoe came to realize that his fleet's primary purpose "was not destruction of the enemy fleet, but command of the sea with the accompanying ability to maintain the blockade." Ultimately, we see a successful adjustment on the strategic level by the British, contrasted with a complete failure of German grand strategy. Finally, this is clearly a well researched book. Telling figures on German economic imports show precisely the effect of the British blockade. Information on the coal consumption of ships could easily have been left out, but because of its inclusion, we have a much better understanding of a ship's limitations and abilities. The reader comes to know the characters involved in the drama, and we can thereby understand their choices better. Robert Massie's careful attention is evident throughout the book and contributes to its stature as a seminal volume in understanding World War I at sea, as well as the evolution of seapower and strategy in the early twentieth century.

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Mayor, Adrienne. *Greek Fire, Poison Arrows & Scorpion Bombs: Biological and Chemical Warfare in the Ancient World*. New York: Overlook, 2003. 319pp. \$27.95

Adrienne Mayor's recent effort is a comprehensive review of the use of biological and chemical weapons by ancient cultures. Mayor is an independent scholar of the classics and folklore who lives in Princeton, New Jersey. She has been published in *MHQ: Quarterly Journal of Military History* and various archeology journals, and she is the author of *The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2000); a similarly titled program is scheduled for the History Channel in July 2004.

This work describes in detail the use of weapons of mass destruction by the ancient cultures of Greece, Rome, China, India, Islamic regions, and Mongolia. Mayor presents a much needed update of the historical use of these weapons. If modern scientists appear to understand the nature and effects of chemical and biological weapons through their expertise in biochemical and molecular sciences and epidemiology, ancient civilizations created and used similar weapons by empirical evidence alone.

The (mythical) first use of a biological weapon in the ancient world was by Hercules, who dipped his arrows in the venom of the slain Hydra. Ancient myths may also reflect the realities of their time. Descriptions of poisoned wounds in the Trojan War accurately depict the effects of snake venom and other toxins, lending confirmation of the use of this type of weapon. In AD 198-99, the citizens of Hatra (the