Naval War College Review

Volume 46
Number 1 *Winter*

Article 12

1993

# Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming of the Great War

James Goldrick

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review

## Recommended Citation

Goldrick, James (1993) "Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming of the Great War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 46 : No. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol46/iss1/12

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Senior American naval authorities have routinely paid lip service to the importance of MCM, usually after painful reminders. And yet, the author suggests, MCM is not and never was quite important enough to them to get the needed resources, despite the fact that "the recent experiences of the *Samuel B. Roberts*, *Tripoli*, and *Princeton* remind us that even our most valuable and expensive warships can be easily stopped by simple, cheap mines." Why should this be so? Perhaps the key reason is that the business of countering mines, to use a felicitous phrase, has always been a "danger field," in that it gets no respect. The widespread view that "minesweeping is tedious, minehunting is more tedious, and countering mines cannot be made easy, cheap, or convenient," makes MCM organizationally and professionally unattractive. Responsibility for mine warfare has usually been fragmented, with the result that MCM is a low-priority claimant for funding or for high-level interest (though the recent establishment of COMINEWARCOM as a type commander may finally ameliorate this to an extent). Professionally, MCM and mine warfare have been paths to neither glory nor promotion; more typically, they have been considered "unpleasant work for a naval man, an occupation like that of rat-catching."

Will matters be different in the future? The author pessimistically notes that "due to real competing needs, priorities, and lack of mine warfare knowledge within the Navy, it has been impossible to sustain adequate priority and funding for MCM." Today's budgetary constraints may make competing needs and priorities hard to change. However, the professional ignorance of most officers about MCM can certainly be redressed.

A good start would be to make *Damn the Torpedoes* required reading for naval officers, particularly for surface officers and members of operational staffs. If appreciation for MCM and its difficulty does not become more widespread, the Navy is likely to encounter more embarrassments and losses to mines in future operations. It will never be known what might have happened if an amphibious landing had actually been attempted in Kuwait, but Iraqi mining certainly complicated the planning. Future foes will doubtless take note.

Massie, Robert K. *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming of the Great War.* New York: Random House, 1991. 1007pp. $35

This is a history centred around personalities. Robert Massie has employed his considerable and tireless narrative skills to give the reader a thousand pages that detail the complex relationships of the political, military, and diplomatic elites of Great Britain and Germany in the decades leading to the Great War. In this, Massie has written in the tradition of such works as Cecil Woodham Smith's biography of Queen Victoria in creating a compelling picture of life within the ruling classes.

There is, however, one difficulty. Much of the tragedy of 1914-1918 can clearly be explained through consideration of the posturings of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the ambitions of Tirpitz, and the enthusiasms of Fisher and Churchill. But Massie's concentration on Anglo-German issues oversimplifies the question of origin of the war to absurdity and ignores the fact that the heat had gone out of the rivalry by 1914. The conflict began as an Austro-Serbian dispute and then went on to other things; the involvement of Britain was by no means simple, or even inevitable until the point at which Germany violated Belgain neutrality.

Other criticisms could be mentioned regarding Massie's lack of a wider political and economic context, but in this naval journal it is fair to concentrate only upon Massie's attempts to cover the naval issues. They are gravely flawed. First, the author has made no use of modern scholarship and its more balanced view of the Victorian and Edwardian navies, and second, he has employed the arguments of witnesses who have never been known for their objectivity.

That Massie's mastery of naval matters might be less than complete is evidenced by the multitude of errors and solecisms apparent in his first few pages on the Trafalgar campaign in 1805. He ignores the fact that Nelson had chased Villeneuve to the West Indies, calls Trafalgar a bay (it is a cape), confers on Collingwood a title (with incorrect usage) which he did not possess until after the battle, and employs lurid tabloid prose to describe *Victory*'s encounter with *Redoubtable*. These pages stand in defiance of C.S. Forester's example that sailing warfare can be described in terms which are not only vivid and gripping for the contemporary reader but seamanlike—and historically correct.

The errors continue—Massie's misinterpretation of the Admiralty's reaction to the French *La Gloire*, the armoured ship produced in 1858. By taking the launch of the wooden *Victoria* out of context (this may have taken place in 1859 but the ship was on the stocks long before *La Gloire*'s nature was known), Massie launches himself upon a thesis of naval inertia and conservatism which minimises the real problems of technical uncertainty that the Royal Navy (and *all* other navies) had to face between 1860 and 1914. It also minimises the quality of the response. Close inspection of his references demonstrates that Massie's authorities are limited. He makes extensive use of the letters of Lord Fisher, who was never known for moderation or strict attention to the truth in his writings and who was in so many ways the contemporary epitome of the dictum, "the devil quotes scripture to suit his ends."

Massie's other sources are little better. Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon left the active Royal Navy in the wake of a scandal resulting from his too assiduous support for Fisher and his unscrupulous methods. Admiral Sir Percy Scott, the gunnery reformer, was another zealot whose obduracy and lack of perspective might have achieved much but

brought him grief and wasted effort, therefore making him an unreliable historical witness. Massie's fourth reference is Vice Admiral Kenneth Dewar, one of the "Young Turks" of the pre-1914 era. He was embittered by his involvement in the *Royal Oak* affair of 1928 in which his inability as a battleship captain to serve with a choleric flag officer resulted in his court martial and that of his executive officer and the blasting of the careers of all unfortunate enough to be involved.

Massie has employed Arthur Marder's works *The Anatomy of British Seapower* and *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow* but has failed to consult more recent scholarship (particularly Jon Sumida's *In Defense of Naval Supremacy*) to achieve a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of the development of the dreadnought battleship and the battle cruiser and of their role in British defence and financial policy. He deploys partly understood snippets of technical knowledge which are often out of context and sometimes factually incorrect.

The pity of this book is that it represents an unnecessary example of the equally unnecessary but seemingly ever-wider gap that exists between "popular" and "academic" history. A writer of Robert Massie's quality has the opportunity to present a synthesis of historical knowledge to a wide public audience and to act thereby as the popular interpreter of the specialist historians. In confining himself so largely to works twenty or more years old, Robert Massie has missed the opportunity. *Dreadnought* is compelling to read but it is not good history.

JAMES GOLDRICK
Commander, Royal Australian Navy
Naval War College

---

German, Tony. *The Sea Is at Our Gates*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990. 360pp. C$24.95

"The wholesome sea is at her gates—her gates both east and west," is the legend carved above the entrance to the Canadian parliament buildings, and the title of a popular history of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). Both the promotional material and the author's prologue for this book suggest the promise of an authoritative work that will complete the deficient operational historiography of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). It is however, a promise unfulfilled. Instead, we have a breathless, almost journalistic account of the Canadian navy.

Commander Tony German is the son of one of the first group of officers to train for the Royal Canadian Navy. His father commanded ships during World War II through the post-war naval heyday. The author's personal view of the events which shaped Canada's maritime forces is a deeply sentimental story.

German has attempted to right the perceived wrong that Canada's tremendous efforts during World War II, Korea, and at the height of the Cold War have largely gone unrecognized. He has accomplished this in his description of the Canadian operations during the Cuban missile crisis, when the