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Fraser of North Cape: The Life of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fraser (1888-1981)

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stood among the writers of the 60s and 70s and Radford's memoirs should be useful when historians get around to deal with the subject in a more dispassionate way.

Pity that Admiral Radford did not finish the story, nor deal with its beginnings! Still, *From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam* is well-written and informative and belongs on the reading lists of serving officers and military historians alike.

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Humble, Richard. *Fraser of North Cape: The Life of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fraser (1888-1981)*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983. 386pp. \$29.95

Bruce Fraser is not one of the better known senior British flag officers of the Second World War. While he held responsible posts, including First Sea Lord with the rank of Admiral of the Fleet from 1948 until his retirement late in 1951, other famous Royal Navy officers come more readily to mind: Dudley Pound, A.B. Cunningham, Mountbatten, Rawlings, and Vian, for example. Such men were where the action was, either as makers of grand strategy or in the thick of it in the war at sea. Despite his competence as a professional naval officer, Fraser never had the opportunity for the equivalent kind of visibility save his victory in personal combat when he commanded the Home Fleet forces that sank the German battleship *Scharnhorst* in 1943. Indeed, when he

later was nominated for a peerage he chose the title "Fraser of North Cape" in recognition of the area off Norway where the battle had been fought. Thus it would seem that in Fraser's mind his greatest achievement in some 48 years of naval service had been the destruction of a single enemy warship.

That battle symbolized, in a number of ways, the kinds of contributions that Fraser made to the naval service, for he was above all else the senior member of the Royal Navy's gun club. The very caliber of the 14-inch guns of the *Duke of York*, Fraser's flagship at North Cape, had been the result of Fraser's authority as Director of Ordnance in the mid-1930s, when he had chosen that size main armament for the *King George V* class battleship. He considered the more powerful 16-inch guns, which the United States and Japan would select for their battleships, as incompatible with the naval treaty tonnage limitations in force at the time.

It was with such heavyweight armament that the prewar Royal Navy establishment concerned itself, owing to the mind-set of such influential bureaucrats as Fraser who, despite their intelligence, failed to foresee the emergence of naval airpower, of naval forces with long sea legs, and of the kinds of logistical support necessary for extended naval campaigns. Even the prewar command of an aircraft carrier apparently had little effect on Fraser's way of thinking. As a consequence German land-based airpower denied Great Britain control of the sea on the Murmansk lines

of communication and in the Mediterranean, because the British were without adequate air forces afloat. In the Pacific, as well, the big guns of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were no match for Japanese airpower, and Great Britain lost both Singapore and its prestige as an imperial power. And the want of logistical support afloat would become Fraser's greatest challenge when he attempted to prepare the Royal Navy for service in the western Pacific in the last months of war.

It was Churchill who had demanded for political reasons that the Royal Navy—hitherto accustomed to operating from fixed bases—be allowed to enter the Pacific war after Germany's surrender. He got his way with Roosevelt despite the objections of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, who regarded the British as both a nuisance and a logistical burden. It fell upon Fraser as the commander in chief of the British Pacific Fleet both to establish his own organic logistical support and to win the cooperation and approval of the principal American Pacific commanders, Nimitz, Spruance, and Halsey, none of whom welcomed the British. Fraser succeeded at both, using diplomacy to establish good will with the Americans and exercising his administrative ability eventually to make the British self-sufficient despite all odds.

It must have been a difficult adjustment for Fraser, when he came hat in hand to the Pacific theater, having to face the fact that the US Navy had so overwhelmingly surpassed the Royal

Navy as the world's greatest seapower. The Americans did not always make it any easier for him. Nimitz, for example, resented the heavy message traffic that preceded Fraser's first visit to Pearl Harbor. In his biography of Nimitz, author E. B. Potter related how Nimitz wrote King that "I do not need Paul Revere (with his three lanterns) to tell me that the British are coming. The attached paraphrase of six Top Secret dispatches reads like an operation order for an occupation force. Perhaps it is intended to be an occupation force." In another episode the executive officer of Spruance's flagship wanted to render full honors when a British rear admiral made his official call. Spruance scratched any such arrangements and directed that, as with all visitors regardless of rank, a single boatswain's mate in dungarees and his pipe was enough.

Fraser's task was made all the more difficult by the Admiralty's unreasonable insistence that Fraser's fleet retain its British ways in such matters as communication doctrine and uniform dress, however impractical. To his credit Fraser realized that his fleet had to conform to the American way, and so they did. The British carriers were a tremendous asset and did much to alleviate the threat of Japanese aircraft against the Okinawa invasion forces. Spruance's attitude changed from skepticism to admiration when he finally came to realize the fighting skills of the British forces. (One of this book's most serious omissions, by the way, is any meaningful assessment of the role

and impact of the British Pacific Fleet in combat.)

The two different naval cultures created its amusing moments. Fraser, for example, was accustomed to a sumptuous flag mess in the Royal Navy tradition, and his first meeting with Spruance was something of a shock. Fraser later recalled that Spruance was “. . . a great commander—but very austere. He gave me lunch; I think we had a couple of lettuces, or something.” By that time Fraser had become accustomed to courtesy calls from American flag officers during the late afternoon cocktail hour. This practice had once prompted Fraser to suggest to the visiting Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, that alcohol be permitted aboard American ships. “Actually I’m in favor of this,” Knox was remembered as replying. “It’s the *admirals* who are all against it!” Even Nimitz was shameless, and Potter relates how Nimitz once wrote that when the Allied fleet was anchored in Tokyo Bay at war’s end he intended to call upon Fraser “. . . partly on official business, partly because I like him, and mostly to get a Scotch and soda before dinner because our ships are dry.”

In summary, this is a book about a distinguished flag officer who was a senior member of the Royal Navy establishment, whose greatest talents were as a bureaucrat, politician, and diplomat. There is reason to believe that he probably would have succeeded in combat, but for reasons unexplained he was never given that opportunity other than the *Scharnhorst*

episode. Nevertheless Churchill had wanted to elevate him to First Sea Lord even before *Scharnhorst*, when it was apparent that Pound was dying in 1943, but Fraser declined because he felt that his lack of front-line experience would deny his acceptance by the fleet. So A.B. Cunningham got the job instead, Fraser had to wait until his twilight years, and there apparently was considerable friction between them in the interim, presumably because Cunningham knew he had been the second choice.

Having said all this, there are problems with the book itself. Foremost is that it is an “authorized biography” written during Fraser’s final years, and he had authority to review and approve the manuscript. Such arrangements, however well intentioned, do not promote objectivity. Hence the book is uniformly uncritical and discreet; one senses the author would not have revealed any less than complimentary aspects of Fraser’s character, intellect, or professional competence. We also are told little of his personal life as a bachelor devoted to his mother. The research material too is limited, primarily oral interviews with Fraser starting at age 89, Fraser’s personal papers, correspondence with selected members of Fraser’s staff, and published secondary sources. The text suffers from the inclusion of long, verbatim documents, particularly what appear to be every commendation Fraser received during his career. The book’s organization suffers, as well. Some forty percent of the text addresses his prewar career which is

much less significant than what he did after the war began. The *Scharnhorst* battle includes some 38 pages of text, while duty in the Pacific rates only 17 pages and his final tour as First Sea Lord but 11; altogether not a well-balanced division of emphasis.

In conclusion, this book could very well interest the ardent naval historian or buff, but both the protagonist and the way he is described would very likely not appeal to a wide audience.

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Mearsheimer, John J. *Conventional Deterrence*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983. 296pp. \$29.50

Although scholars and defense policy analysts have been writing about deterrence of conflict for decades, the interest in and attention paid to "conventional" vs. "nuclear" strategies of conflict avoidance is experiencing an analytical renaissance. The reasons for this renewed interest are multiple:

- The realization by the Western allies that political and budgetary constraints will in all likelihood prevent any significant *quantitative* reinforcement of Nato's conventional strength in Europe. Therefore, force enhancement will most probably be limited to qualitative advances and alterations in tactics.

- An emerging consensus that the Western nuclear posture may (a) no longer remain sufficiently credible to deter a Soviet assault (conventional or nuclear) on western Europe, and

(b) if this is the case then the erosion of political credibility which would result from such an admission might serve to unravel what is left of Nato's "strategic partnership."

- The hope among historical scholars that the study of past failures and successes of conventional deterrent strategies may serve as prescriptive guides for future policy.

It is the last factor which has inspired John J. Mearsheimer to produce *Conventional Deterrence*, an intellectually rich analysis which is perhaps the broadest treatment of the issue to date.

Mearsheimer goes beyond the usual static indices to examine lessons of history on both the military and political levels. Although he has a keen interest in the technical issues which have themselves created a debate among specialists—e.g., maneuver vs. firepower—he does not allow his analysis to become stalled in endless tactical dissection which, while important to the battlefield commander, are less critical to uncovering key political and military trends.

In addition, Mearsheimer does not limit his examination to Central Europe—the locus for the classical, and often dated, East-West scenarios. There is a splendid chapter on "Conventional Deterrence and the Arab-Israeli Conflict" which examines major Arab-Israeli wars and the reasons why deterrence failed in each case. The focus here will be on a later chapter in the book, "The Prospects for Conventional Deterrence in Central Europe," where the author seeks "to determine