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The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity, 1919–22: Naval and Foreign Policy under Lloyd George

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BOOK REVIEWS

HIGHS AND LOWS

The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity, 1919–22: Naval and Foreign Policy under Lloyd George, by G. H. Bennett. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 296 pages. \$120 (paperback \$39.95, e-book \$28.76).

Royal Navy captain Stephen Roskill's 1968 study *Naval Policy between the Wars* (Naval Institute Press) has dominated the historiographical scene on this subject for half a century. G. H. Bennett's volume now successfully adds much depth and new understanding to the naval policies of Prime Minister David Lloyd George's government in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Bennett's volume follows, but with a much different focus, Erik Goldstein and John Maurer's *The Washington Conference 1921–22* (Routledge, 1994) and Donald Lisio's *British Naval Supremacy and Anglo-American Antagonisms, 1914–1930* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014). Rather than following the traditional approach to this period of concentrating on international diplomacy and external issues, Bennett demonstrates "a multifaceted approach rooted in political and naval history but opening up new and cutting-edge debates in other areas of historical study to transform traditional debates" (p. xiv). Laudably, Bennett seeks an approach to naval history that breaks down the artificial barriers that place the study of

navies in a watertight compartment and isolate it from "total history" and the broader patterns of relevant linkages in political, military, economic, business, social, gender, and labor history.

The works of Volker Berghahn, Jon Sumida, and Samuel P. Huntington have had an impact on Bennett's focus. Significantly, Bennett's approach reflects the parallels he sees in the 1919–22 period with the issues surrounding British naval policies in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

In opening his sensitive and innovative study of this three-year period, Bennett points out that Lloyd George's government had a particularly tricky range of problems to balance after World War I. While other recent historians have interpreted the period as one of discontinuity in British naval and defense policies, Bennett sees continuity. The inability of the government to "get it right" in the area of naval policy was a direct result of the size and complexity of the issues that it faced. The difficulty lay in the interconnectedness of naval policy with government politics, the private sector,

and communities. As Samuel Huntington would have put it, British naval policy had been in a state of “disequilibrium” even before the beginning of the First World War, and this continued into the postwar period. Britain’s economy was declining in comparison with other national economies; changing technology and weapons were rendering obsolete Britain’s investment in its battleship fleet; and other countries, notably Japan and the United States, had the potential to build navies that would end British naval mastery. British leaders correctly saw these developments as significant threats to the security, stability, and future of the British Empire.

In the immediate postwar era, Britain faced massive war debts, along with a range of severe social and political issues complicated by unemployment, labor unrest, and the rise of socialism. These issues combined to create challenges to the existing social, economic, and political order. In trying to create naval policies in this complex environment, the Lloyd George government made its national security decisions on the basis of what it might be able to afford rather than on preparing for the worst-case scenario. That worst-case situation, of course, was the war that would occur twenty years later, but that neither the government nor the British voter could contemplate so soon after the horrific events of World War I. Ministers were forced to balance naval preparedness for a future war against national bankruptcy and the fears of a socialist victory by election or revolution. In this situation, Lloyd George placed his ministry’s priority solely on the financial consideration and the reduction of public spending rather than on a considered analysis of the strategic situation and

the likelihood of war. The ministry’s institution in 1919 of the “ten-year rule” in defense planning effectively excluded the possibility of thinking about war.

As Bennett points out, this was in one sense a logical and pragmatic approach, but it forced the Royal Navy and the other armed services to find alternative explanations for keeping the service in a state of preparedness to deal with the future security of Britain and the empire. While the service turned to effective arguments such as showing that battleship construction helped reduce unemployment, Bennett argues that this undermined a clear understanding of the purpose and value of the navy, harming it in the long run. He goes on to argue that the ten-year rule had a pernicious and long-term effect by establishing the precedent that leaders could make competent defense decisions without an assessment of strategic needs and threats. Bennett underscores the lesson from this period that political imperatives cannot compromise strategic threat assessments and decisions. “Dangers must be identified and noted, even if the means to meet them are not immediately at hand” (pp. 179–80).

Bennett’s book is a significant contribution to naval history. Not only does it provide a new interpretation of historical events, but it does so by placing the navy in a much broader context. While other scholars may argue points of interpretation, his vision in bringing about a broader understanding of the naval dimensions of this period is a model for others to follow and apply. Equally important, his volume has much to say to current practitioners and strategic planners.

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