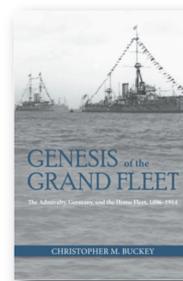


BOOK REVIEW:

Genesis of the Grand Fleet: the Admiralty, Germany, and the Home Fleet, 1896-1914

by Christopher M. Buckley

Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, Maryland; 2021; 392 pp.; ISBN 9781682475812 (hardcover); RRP \$173.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number: 717 BUCK 2021



This is the story of Admiral Sir John Fisher's creation of the British Home Fleet in 1907 and its evolution into the Grand Fleet of 1914. Fisher formed the Home Fleet by combining a core of armoured warships with the reserve divisions of warships previously controlled by the three Royal Navy home port commands. This concentration was a logical development of growth and change in naval strategy, technology and tactics. Human failings and larger-than-life characters, such as Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Jellicoe, Callaghan and many other officers, are central to the story.

Pre-war planning accepted the importance of the torpedo and its delivery by submarine. But, in the event, surface vessels and their heavy guns held the field, largely due to financial constraints and manning requirements. While torpedo-armed flotilla craft were seen as the best solution, they only ever supplemented the battleships.

Other important factors included the Balfour Government's anti-militarism and wish to cut naval expenditure to fund social reforms, the 'naval-industrial complex', interpersonal conflicts, funding for shore establishments, and the evolution of design and usage preferences for battleships, torpedo-boat destroyers, submarines and cruisers. The use of fuel oil in place of coal had major logistic and financial implications and led to the creation in 1909 of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. External factors included: a transition to facing Germany after the defeat of Russian sea power by the Japanese in 1905; lingering concern about the 'Dual Alliance' between France and Russia; and apprehension as late as 1908 that the United States might form an alliance with Germany.

A clash between Fisher and his subordinate Lord Beresford, who organised a campaign criticising Fisher's handling of the Navy and its reform, was appalling. Fisher was not blameless – he followed three 'Requisites for Success': ruthless, relentless and remorseless. He had been chosen largely to prune expenditure. The Senior Service under Fisher had become '*secretive and uncooperative with the outside world ... evidenced by the decline in contributions by senior naval officers to the Royal United Services Institution*' (p. 252).

The role of Prince Louis Battenberg in the immediate response by the Admiralty to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, is shown as most creditworthy. An awkward change of command from Sir George Callaghan to Sir John Jellicoe, took place on the day Britain declared war against Germany.

The credit given to the Grand Fleet for keeping the lines of communication open and enabling the land forces to prevail in 1918 is well earned. In November 1918, it

comprised 45 dreadnoughts from three nations, 40 cruisers and 5 aircraft carriers. It included five United States Navy capital ships.

With the British and United States Merchant Marines, it had ensured Allied command of the sea that provided '*the spearshaft of which the Allied armies have been the point*' (p. 1).

But the Fleet's performance was by no means flawless. These flaws included the predictable defeat on 1 November 1914 at Coronel near Chile; and the failure of the Royal Navy and French Navy to clear the Dardanelles in 1915 because they could not neutralise Turkish coast artillery, did not change their bombardment return route, and attempted to use ineffective fishing trawlers to clear sea-mines.

The story embraces the inconclusive Battle of Jutland – although that is deemed a strategic victory because the German High Seas Fleet was thereafter mostly confined. It mentions the five collisions between eight vessels on 31 January 1918 that caused the loss of two submarines and 100 men, and damaged three other submarines and a light cruiser. It canvasses the stellar contribution of the United States Navy in defeating German U Boat wolf packs, thereby allowing supplies of men and *matériel* to cross the Atlantic and support the land battles in France and Belgium.

The book, however, fails to canvass the provision by the Dominions of major vessels except HMS *Queen Elizabeth* by Federated Malayan States – it mentions HMS *New Zealand*, but not that it was financed by the New Zealand government; it does not mention HMAS *Australia*. It also fails to acknowledge the use of Dominion-trained officers in British warships; it uses French phrases without translation; and it would benefit from a timeline of events.

The considerations which led to the Grand Fleet's creation – diplomatic, technical and financial – continue to be relevant today. They underscore the controversy about Australia's decision announced in September 2021 to cancel a submarine contract with the French and enter an arrangement with the United States and Britain to acquire, build and operate nuclear-powered submarines.

The book is of compelling worth to every country reliant on maritime forces for security and open sea-lines of communication for sustenance. It is well written with relevant photos, comprehensive notes, a bibliography, and an index. It would be invaluable to any student of naval affairs and staff work, and the complex interactions of politicians, bureaucrats and serving Defence Force members.

Ken Broadhead