

H-Net Reviews

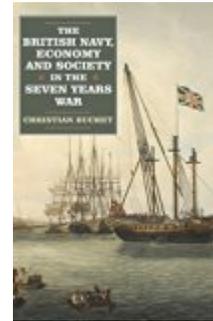
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christian Buchet. *The British Navy, Economy and Society in the Seven Years War*. Rochester: Boydell and Brewer Press, 2013. 316 pp. \$115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-801-2.

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From the mid-1960s, the study of administration has had a major impact on military and naval history. It had always been understood that navies relied heavily on their administrative infrastructures, but until then naval affairs had seldom been studied from the perspective of the administration that provided the logistical basis of campaigns. The “new naval history,” which emerged in the 1960s, integrated campaigns into their logistical and economic supporting systems and has provided the bulk of recent historical insights into naval affairs.

Among a number of important contributions to this field is the work of Christian Buchet. Buchet carried out a major study, published in 1991, of British and French expeditions to the West Indies between 1688 and 1763. Throughout this work, the ability of the logistical framework to sustain operations in the Caribbean was clear as was the ultimate triumph of Britain in that transatlantic conflict. The link between the successful solution to the logistical problems of campaigning in the West Indies and the decisive British victory in the Americas during the Seven Years’ War (1756–63) was so apparent that Buchet subsequently turned his attention to the voluminous correspondence of the British Victualling Office, which was responsible for the supply of foodstuffs to the Royal Navy. His study, *Marine, économie et société. Un exemple d’interaction: l’avitaillement de la Royal Navy durant la guerre de sept ans*, was published in French in 1999. In this detailed examination of the Victualling Office (under the supervision of the Victualling Board), its contracting procedures, supply networks, and agricultural markets in Britain, Ireland, and North America, Buchet concluded that it was the effective administrative exploitation of regional markets and a flexible approach to contracts and sources of supply that made the criti-

cal difference to the application of sea power. Britain discovered the secret of sustaining war at long distance. The provision of fresh victuals in European waters and effective supply and storage to distant bases was an administrative victory that “fut sans conteste le facteur déterminant des succès britanniques” (was undoubtedly the determinant of British success).[1] Buchet’s work confirmed what studies had already shown for the period 1739–48, and were later to show for 1793–1815, that eighteenth-century administrators were not the stereotypically corrupt and ineffective agents of a malfunctioning state apparatus, but were, within the confines of the contemporary tasks, social norms, and capabilities, remarkably successful.

The book under review is an English-language edition of this work. It is essentially a direct translation of the 1999 French edition, with a short foreword by one of its translators, Michael Duffy. Duffy makes some reference to the work that has been conducted on victualling since 1999. The reorganized bibliography acknowledges some newer works, but is, essentially, unchanged. However, Buchet’s work is today an essential part of naval administrative historiography. It has stood the test of time and deserves its publication in the near original form.

Although acknowledging many other changes in technologies, operational practice, and dietary understanding during the Seven Years’ War, the central theme of Buchet’s argument is that, unlike France or Spain, Britain was able to build and maintain an advanced resource base in the Americas. Maintaining supplies for the fleet and expeditionary armies provided the foundations for continuous presence and reduced the attrition of disease on its fighting power. The book follows a

short history of the development of victualling up to the 1750s, explaining changing contracting procedures and an increasing concentration of purchasing in the London market. Buchet explains why the Victualling Board was able to supply bases across Britain, the Mediterranean, and the western Atlantic continuously, effectively, and at lower cost than had occurred in the period 1689-1713. The idea of a pragmatic response to needs runs through the book. He deals with shifting contracting practice, between direct purchase and supply and the use of contracting agents. Practice was allowed to differ at various ports and regions, and for different commodities, depending on existing infrastructure, as well as the needs and opportunities presented by market conditions. Vitally important to this administrative flexibility was a reliable fiscal system, a solid economic base in the large London agricultural produce markets, and the stability of a few large-scale contractors. Reliance on a few contractors in key provisions did not lead to the common negative consequences of near monopoly (high prices, low quality, or poor timing of supply). Instead, the Victualling Board was able to impose strict quality control on these suppliers. This was also done with few prosecutions or cancellations for nonperformance.

The picture that emerges from Buchet's study is not of naval force being constrained by logistical limitations,

but of a supply network adapting to meet the needs of an expanding naval war. The rise of Plymouth as a victualling base to overtake Portsmouth in terms of volume of provisions by 1761 was the lynchpin for the successful blockade of Brest. The successful expansion of supply at Jamaica was vital to campaigns from 1759 to 1762.

Buchet's work provides a detailed picture of the 1750s victualling system and shows how it contributed to the range and durability of British naval power, giving it a decisive edge over its Bourbon enemies. Overall Buchet concludes that the Victualling Board could hardly have done better in its attempts to optimize the supply process. Work carried out since the original publication has only reinforced his conclusions, but it has also stimulated additional interesting questions, such as why it was able to do this and why it was unable to sustain that level of excellence consistently up to 1815. To have Buchet's work available in English will be a great boon to scholars interested in developing the history of Britain's naval administrative system.

Note

[1]. Christian Buchet, *Marine, économie et société. Un exemple d'interaction: l'avitaillement de la Royal Navy durant la guerre de sept ans* (Paris: H. Champion, 1999), 79.

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