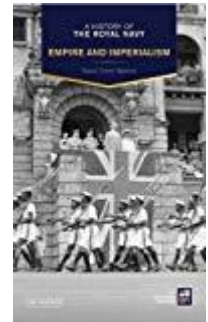


Daniel Owen Spence. *A History of the Royal Navy: Empire and Imperialism.* London: I.B.Tauris, 2016. xiii + 238 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78076-543-3.



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British naval history is clustered around great wars. Historians of the late-eighteenth-century navy have filled bookshelves with Horatio Nelson biographies, but also with social, cultural, strategic, economic, and technological examinations of the emergence of Britain's maritime supremacy. Historians of the two world wars have been similarly busy, debating war aims, technological changes, grand strategy, and the roles of aircraft and submarines. In between the two clusters, the bookshelves are lightly populated. Compared to the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, the long stretch of the nineteenth century that saw the height of the British Empire is understudied.

Daniel Owen Spence's survey of the navy's role in the British imperial project is well-positioned to fill that gap. It also aims to fill a gap in its own series, *A History of the Royal Navy*, which upon completion will include no less than fourteen volumes. (The sheer size of the project makes possible redundancies inevitable, and one of the first questions to ask about the volume under review here is how it will mesh with a forthcoming

volume on "The Victorian Age.") Taken together, the series is a kind of curriculum vitae of the navy. Published by the National Museum of the Royal Navy, the series makes grand claims about how it "sheds new light on almost every aspect of Britain's Royal Navy" (p. xv). This is perhaps a step too far, but that should not be seen as a serious criticism. The series is fundamentally a work of synthesis, and should be evaluated in those terms. A more important question is the audience. It seems clear from the series introduction and the volumes already published that at least one aspect of the audience is intended to be ministers threatening budget cuts. Though Spence does well to avoid a triumphalist approach, the series explicitly reminds its audience that the navy has a long and important history.

Works of synthesis targeted at academic audiences place serious demands on both the author and the publisher, and Spence's volume simply does not have the bibliographic heft to satisfy those already familiar with British naval history and its historiography, particularly in the age of

sail. From the perspective of a general reader, though, Spence is more successful. He has a clear perspective in his narrative, namely naval operations and cultural influences in an imperial context. He skips neatly over operations and institutions not directly relevant to the empire. There are no French invasion scares in this book, no what-if accounts of Jutland, and no explorations of the Royal Dockyards. Instead, we read of gunboats in China, the long history of competing claims to the Falklands, and the navy's role in spreading cricket. The book is organized roughly chronologically from the Tudors to the twentieth century, but it is also organized thematically: beginning with arguments for empire in the early modern period, Spence moves through science and exploration, gunboat diplomacy, colonial cultures, the development of colonial naval forces, and the postcolonial period.

The collateral damage of Spence's single-minded focus on imperial operations and cultures is a tendency to lose the chronological thread. When discussing the slave trade, Spence neglects to provide the general survey of the slave trade that one might expect in a work of synthesis. Instead, he bounces around confusingly. He begins at the 1807 Slave Trade Act, then jumps forward to Lagos in 1860 and then back to the American Revolution in 1775 and then forward again to manpower shortages in 1916 and then back again to punitive expeditions to Canada in the 1720s. Academics will not be the only readers suffering from whiplash and confusion.

One explanation for the chronological difficulties is that in addition to his narrative of imperial operations, Spence has an argument to make. The navy served as the security force for Britain's global "paternalistic mission": religious conversion to Christianity, economic conversion to free trade, and cultural and legal conversion to Western norms. Naval operations spanned the globe, and missionaries of various kinds soon followed. Naval personnel were the point of first contact,

shaping not only the perceptions of communities from Tahiti to Kenya but also creating an environment in which British merchants and missionaries could operate. The Pax Britannica was in fact characterized by violence and uncertainty, at least in the imperial context, and naval personnel had to strike a fine balance between demonstrations of British strength and friendly relations with a staggering variety of peoples and cultures.

Spence's examination of the cultural exchange between the navy and the colonies plays to his expertise and provides a pleasant combination of interesting vignettes and authoritative arguments. The navy and its drills influenced dance troupes in Mombasa; amateur naval productions of British musicals appeared in ports from British Columbia to the Cape; and Royal Navy Volunteer Reservists in Trinidad sang calypso music with patriotic lyrics about defeating the Kaiser, which Spence argues was an essential expression of Trinidadian national identity.

The book's strength lies in these cultural history sections and less in the narrative of imperial operations. The great benefit of a fourteen-volume series, then, is that Spence's volume perhaps does not need to provide the authoritative account of imperial operations. Instead, its cultural history of the navy and the empire will provide a necessary supplement and a different perspective from the future volume on the Victorian navy and the existing volume on the navy since 1900.

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