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Hector C. Bywater. *The Great Pacific War: A History of the American-Japanese Campaign of 1931-1933, Vol. 1.* Bedford, Mass.: Applewood Books, 2002. vii + 317 pp. $15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55709-557-2.

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Prophesying War

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Bywater's novel about a Japanese-American war occurring in the early 1930s has had a long and gusty run. Published simultaneously in New York and London in 1925, it was denounced by indignant Japanese because it predicted that Japan would lose the war; nonetheless, it was read at their staff colleges. It was reprinted in the States in 1931, in 1942 shortly after Pearl Harbor, and again at the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor as well as at other times. Abridgements and foreign language versions are too numerous to mention. The work is remembered for predicting the strategy of surprise and furnishing the model for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In fact, it did neither, although the claim is repeated in this edition. Hector Bywater died in England in August 1940, probably of alcohol poisoning, sixteen months before Pearl Harbor, during the Battle of Britain when the RAF and the Luftwaffe were fighting–part of a new war unfamiliar to him.[1]

He was a naval expert, a battleship man, born near the Portsmouth dockyards, who worked for British naval intelligence and subsequently became a naval correspondent for the *New York Times* and the *London Daily Telegraph*, among others. He had an on-again off-again relation with the Admiralty, and was adept at winkling out the details of hush-hush foreign warship programs, such as the building of the giant *Yamato* and *Musashi* battlewagons. In 1921 he did an outstanding job of covering the Washington Disarmament Conference for the *Baltimore Sun* without leaving London, seeming to be able to anticipate the proposals of the Japanese delegation, among others.

Bywater knew in intimate detail the warships of the five naval powers that attended the conference, as well as the strategic balance created by the historic agreements. He believed that the treaties left Japan in a dominant position in East Asian waters, and dismissed the idea that the Pacific was too vast for her to come to grips with the United States.[2] In 1921 he produced a well-received volume entitled *Sea Power in the Pacific: A Study of the American-Japanese Naval Problem.* In 1925 he further cashed in on his knowledge, this time with a novel, *The Great Pacific War*, forecasting what form a war would take six years later, in 1931. Neither the British nor the Dominions came into the script, although the Empire had more at stake and less defense in the Far East than the Americans.

Bywater foresaw Japan enjoying some initial success whild ultimately being overwhelmed by the more powerful Americans. Although he stated that his purpose was to discourage Japan from undertaking such an adventure, his account of its picking a fight with America was not conducive to good feeling, and he dropped some inflammable remarks into the text.[3] Whatever his intentions, like a good many tales of *guerres imaginaires*, his book ended by stirring up war fever. Japan had only recently been humiliated by the U.S. Congressional exclusion of Japanese immigrants.

Certainly it is a classic of its kind. Bywater used his expertise to inject flashes of realism; the warships in his battles actually sailed the sea. The forts they fired at actually existed. He was a longtime devotee of war games, and, in short, he produced a gem, imaginative and complete with all manners of specifics for use by amateurs. Eugene O'Neill took it along on vacation and devised a version he played with his family.

But in the book the Americans are not taken by surprise. Their Asiatic Fleet sails out of Manila Bay to battle a superior armada even though there has been no formal notification of war–because the American admiral feels that war is imminent. Bywater knew that the Powers did not count on notification of a breakdown of relations or declarations of war in advance of the hostilities, or at least not much before. The relevant Geneva Convention merely said that such notice should be given. Franklin Roosevelt fully anticipated a Japanese surprise attack in

1941. It was as to where it would come that he and his people guessed wrong.

In short, there is no attack on Pearl Harbor anywhere in the Bywater book. The reason is that in 1925 Pearl Harbor had not been developed to the point where it could support a major fleet and so was of limited importance. Bywater usually stuck to 1925 conditions, but toward the end the necessities of his script pushed him into illogically basing a huge armada there.

The related claim that the actual design of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor drew inspiration from Bywater's 1925 work encounters severe difficulties. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto had the principal role in originating and pushing the attack. He had met Bywater at various conferences and was interviewed by him in London in 1934. But in August 1940 when the newsman died, the American fleet had been only recently posted to Pearl Harbor. Moreover, Yamamoto's project of attacking the American fleet at its base was not conceived until later when the British demonstrated what could be done with torpedo planes launched from a carrier. Their strike against the Italian fleet at anchor in Taranto occurred on November 11, 1940 and both American and Japanese officials immediately recognized its significance, dispatching attaches to find out the details. The Japanese plans went forward thereafter.

The idea that Bywater and his book decisively influenced Japanese war plans has been given currency by William Honan's *Visions of Infamy*, published along with a reprint of the *Great Pacific War* in 1991. Honan spiced his writing with a conspiracy theory, i.e., that Yamamoto may have had Bywater and Melville Cox (a Reuters newsman and one of Bywater's sources in Japan) killed because they could guess the secret of the impending attack. Cox either jumped or was defenestrated from police headquarters in Tokyo shortly after Bywater died. Honan did an impressive amount of research on Bywater's career and wrote an interesting book, but as much as admitted that it left such contentions unproven. Still, for better or worse, most World War II buffs will probably tell you that Bywater predicted Pearl Harbor.

Bywater's script shows its age when compared with the struggle that began in December 1941, particularly in his concentration on battleships and corresponding lack of emphasis on submarine, carrier air, and amphibious operations.

All this aside, Bywater surely gave readers their money's worth. Following a plausible account of the descent into war, he blows up the Panama Canal, for starters. Next, he lands the Japanese in Lingayen Gulf and Lamon Bay near where they actually landed in 1941; terrorizes the Pacific Coast with submarine and seaplane raids; ambushes the American fleet in Magellan Straits; stages an uprising in Oahu and the Big Island by the local Japanese populace; and describes a unified China putting the finishing touches to Japan's defeat. He probably influenced the Americans more than the Japanese with his descriptions of attacks in Hawaii and on the West Coast, but the Japanese Navy actually considered flying boat raids like those in the book.[4]

The 1942 edition of *The Great Pacific War* included a preface by fellow naval expert, Hanson Baldwin, dated a week after Pearl Harbor. Baldwin gave the book a boost by saying that Bywater appeared to be correct in guessing that Japan would attack before warning. Admiral Yamamoto, who had been through the Russo-Japanese War and lost two fingers at the battle of Tsushima, scarcely needed instruction. He might have testified on the matter had he not been ambushed and killed by American fighter aircraft in the Solomons in April 1943.

Fifty years after Pearl Harbor, American views of Yamamoto have softened because he was seen to have been an opponent of war against the United States and in 1991 there was some retrospective debate about the propriety of ambushing him. Ironically, it has since been reported that Yamamoto supposedly advised Premier Fumimaro Konoye that if the mooted summit with Franklin Roosevelt failed to win concessions, Konoye should break off amicably. The Japanese Navy would strike while Konoye was on the way home.[5]

There are numerous passages in the *Great Pacific War* where Bywater appears to have anticipated episodes in the struggle that began sixteen years later. In 1925, war with Japan was not a new idea. The rivalry had occupied such presidents as Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. It resulted in Congressional hearings, and produced both war scares and war plans, before the Naval Limitation treaties tried to defuse it. Bywater had much to work with.

Notes

[1]. Details of Bywater's life from William Honan, *Visions of Infamy* (New York, 1991).

[2]. He had a newspaper debate on this point with Franklin Roosevlet, ibid., chapter 9.

[3]. *Great Pacific War*, pp. 242-243.

[4]. For info on proposed uses of Japanese flying boats against the U.S. during WWII, see messages from Jim Duffy, "QUERY: Kasume Kinsei," 9 May, 2000 and Albert Nofi, "Re: QUERY: Kasume Kinsei," 10 May 2000, in H-War, http://www2.h-net.msu.edu7war/.

[5]. R. Cargill Hall, ed., *Lightning over Bougainville: The Yamamoto Mission Reconsidered* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Herbert Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), p.416.

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