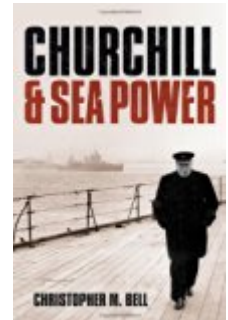


Christopher M. Bell. *Churchill and Sea Power.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xvi + 429 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-969357-3.



Reviewed by J. Garry Clifford

Published on H-Diplo (July, 2013)

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In an essay written in 1916, Winston S. Churchill described Britain as the “Great Amphibian” whose natural home was in the “broad seas” but who could “crawl or even dart ashore—first, a scaly arm with sharp claws” and then “a head with teeth, and shoulders that grow ever broader,” or the beast might “return again to the deep, and strike anew, now here, now there, and no one can guess where the next attack will fall” (p. 76). This Churchillian metaphor captured his vision of what British sea power could accomplish in the Great War, but it can also apply to his own half-century participation in naval affairs.

The author of an outstanding first book on the Royal Navy between the world wars, Christopher M. Bell carefully examines Churchill’s lengthy naval career in this superb new volume. Despite his heroic status indelibly etched in the public mind, Churchill has elicited increasing criticism from naval historians for his alleged failures and inconsistencies. From the botched Gallipoli campaign of 1915 to his second premiership in the 1950s when he had to manage Britain’s imperial

decline, the image of Churchill as infallible statesman and skilled strategist has given way to that of an impetuous, headstrong, and bumbling leader who made many costly mistakes. Bell’s detailed exegesis intends “not to absolve him of blame, but to understand his motives, assess the extent of his responsibility, and evaluate the soundness of the charges” against him (p. 7). In this task the author succeeds admirably.

Bell acknowledges that Churchill was not always clairvoyant. In 1908, the young Liberal saw no likelihood of war with Germany “except perhaps [for] a few tropical plantations and small coaling stations scattered about the world” (pp. 13-14). Nor did he anticipate Germany’s unrestricted use of submarine warfare against merchant ships because he “did not believe that this would ever be done by a civilised power” (p. 42). Churchill’s views regarding Japan between the wars careened from his prediction in 1922 that if Singapore fell, “the whole of the Pacific would fall under the complete supremacy of Japan,” to his wishful desire after the Manchurian crisis that it

was “in the interests of the whole world” that Japan should act as buffer between the Soviet menace and Chinese chaos, to his belated recognition by 1938 that Japan’s army and navy were “running amok” (pp. 101, 140, 146). As late as autumn 1941 he was still insisting that Japan was an “over-valued military power” that could be deterred by “one or two battleships at Singapore” (p. 242). Yet such wobbles were always balanced by keener insights, especially Churchill’s early warnings about German rearmament even before Adolf Hitler came to power. He was also sensitive to advances in technology, as evidenced by his support for planes and tanks in World War I and his belief that “machine power is a substitute for manpower” (p. 83). Having recognized the potential of nuclear weapons as early as the 1920s, he regretfully concluded by 1951 that the “battleships and cruisers of our former glory” would increasingly become “floating bull’s eyes” (p. 315). Indeed, Churchill bequeathed to the nuclear age his famous aphorism that “safety ... will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation” (p. 310).

The author revisits the two famous fiascos attributed to Churchill as first lord of the Admiralty—Gallipoli in 1915 and Norway in 1940. In neither case, Bell emphasizes, was Churchill fully in charge. As first lord during World War I, given his primary goal of concentrating naval forces against Germany, he initially rejected any proposal to force the Turkish Straits as “too far from the main theatre of the war” (p. 61). As an alternative to “chewing barbed wire in Flanders,” however, Churchill soon supported a navy plan to have big-gun battleships penetrate the Dardanelles and systematically reduce all Turkish forts (p. 73). He envisioned an all-navy operation with a quick exit strategy if the Turks did not capitulate quickly. Pressure from others, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith in particular, resulted in the landing of British and French armies, protracted fighting, heavy casualties, and Churchill’s removal as first lord. The “lesson sunk into my nature,” he later

wrote, never “to carry out a major and cardinal operation of war from a subordinate position” (p. 75). And yet he acted much the same way a quarter century later when he urged the mining of Norwegian waters to stop Swedish iron ore exports and to lure German forces into a decisive battle against superior British sea power. “We have everything to gain and nothing to lose,” he confidently told the War Cabinet (p. 174). When the Germans struck first by invading Denmark and Norway in early April 1940, the surprised Royal Navy deployed to intercept Germany’s heavy warships from breaking out into the Atlantic and thus failed to prevent landings in southern Norway. Thereafter Churchill pushed hard for the Allies to recapture Narvik, but was “unable to persuade his colleagues” from scattering forces to Trondheim (p. 188). Refuting charges that Churchill clumsily interfered with tactical operations, Bell downplays any meddling and concludes that the campaign was “virtually unwinnable once the Germans had established a foothold in Norway” (p. 193). The silver lining in the Norway debacle, of course, was that it brought Churchill finally into Number Ten Downing Street.

Bell also explores the “incongruity” between Churchill’s apparent “stinginess” as chancellor of the exchequer for the years 1925-29 and his subsequent reputation as a prophetic advocate of military preparedness in the 1930s (p. 327). Some writers blame him for a blinkered obsession in favor of deep cuts in defense spending and for instituting the so-called ten-year rule (the assumption that Britain would not have to fight a major war for ten years), both of which continued under subsequent governments. Not only does Bell show that it was David Lloyd George, not Churchill, who initiated the ten-year rule, but he also notes that defense appropriations, while low, actually rose slightly during Churchill’s tenure at the Treasury. In an era of relative peace, new technologies, and numerous disarmament conferences, Churchill made a virtue of necessity in arguing: “The longer

you delay the building of new ships ... the better and more powerful is the ship you can build when the time comes" (p. 87). Bell also notes that such criticisms of Churchill rest on the dubious assumption that defense spending would have been greater under a different chancellor and that deeper cuts actually occurred after Churchill left the Treasury. Even if excessive austerity negatively affected Britain's shipbuilding industry and led to shipping shortages during World War II, Churchill's later crusade for rearmament and opposition to appeasement outweighed any long-term damage.

Bell also makes clear that in his strong voice for rearmament in the 1930s, Churchill was focusing primarily on air power rather than sea power. Adolf Hitler, he correctly insisted, could build an air force much more quickly than he could expand the tiny German navy permitted by the Versailles Treaty. Churchill opposed the Anglo-German Naval Treaty of 1935 that allowed Germany to build its fleet to 35 percent of British strength. Nonetheless, even with the *Kriegsmarine* constructing the powerful new battleships *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*, Churchill could confidently assert in early 1939 that there was "no fear of Germany overtaking Great Britain on the sea" (p. 150). "The Navy can lose us the war," he would later say as prime minister, "but only the Air Force can win it" (p. 196). In both world wars, Bell concludes, Churchill understood that sea power could play "only a supporting role"; it could ensure against defeat at sea, but economic coercion alone could not achieve victory over Germany, which also would require an army, an air force, and powerful allies (p. 341).

Nor did Churchill's commitment to a "special relationship" with the United States evolve without occasional hiccups. Differences over naval disarmament during the 1920s elicited occasional piqued comments about the "Yankee Menace" (p. 102). In response to a speech in 1928 by President Calvin Coolidge calling for U.S. superiority in

cruisers, Churchill acidly called Coolidge a "New England backwoodsman" who would "soon sink back into the obscurity from which only accident extracted him" (p. 129). By the mid-thirties, however, as war clouds loomed in Asia and Europe, Churchill renounced any competition between the two navies and proclaimed: "the stronger the United States Navy becomes, the surer are the foundations of peace throughout the world" (p. 147). Once war broke out in September 1939, Anglo-American naval collaboration became institutionalized in the U.S. Navy's Neutrality Patrol and in the Destroyers-for-Bases deal of September 1940.

That reflexive reliance on American naval cooperation was never more evident in further blunders blamed on Churchill that attended the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941. His sending of Force Z (battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*) to Singapore was intended to deter further Japanese aggression in Southeast Asia. Because Churchill thought it "very unlikely" that the Japanese "will enter the war" if they believed that Britain and the United States would stand together in response to an attack on either, he overrode Admiralty protests and dispatched Force Z not so much to defend Malaya but with the political goal of making Tokyo "take Anglo-American co-belligerency for granted" (p. 246). Although deterrence failed, Bell argues that "the underlying logic was sound" and that Churchill's "only real mistake" was in thinking that Japan's warlords would give in to U.S. economic pressure "rather than begin a war they could not hope to win" (p. 247). Churchill "never received a more direct shock" than the loss of *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*, but he famously "slept the sleep of the saved and thankful" once Pearl Harbor brought America into the war and guaranteed eventual victory.

American readers may be disappointed that Bell does not give more attention to his personal relationship with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He does not dwell on the salesmanship inherent

in Churchill's wooing of Roosevelt in their early correspondence between "former naval persons," especially the former's detailed description of the pursuit by the Royal Navy of the pocket battleship *Graf Spee* and his subsequent stage management of his first summit meeting with FDR aboard the ill-fated *Prince of Wales* off the coast of Newfoundland in August 1941. The crucial decision to invade North Africa, which Bell attributes to Churchill's united front with his service chiefs in debates with their American counterparts, may also have resulted from the prime minister's conscious appeal to Roosevelt's own fascination with sea-borne invasions. One can imagine the president, sitting in his wheelchair, smiling at Churchill's comment that Anglo-American forces would not get stuck in North Africa because it would be "a springboard and not a sofa" (p. 287).

Bell does concede that Churchill misled posterity when he wrote in his memoirs that the "only thing that really frightened" him was "the U-boat peril" (p. 281). Here the prime minister's preference for the offensive caused him to neglect the defensive. Fully aware, as Churchill wrote, that victory or defeat depended on "whether Hitler's U-boat attack on Allied tonnage, or the increase and application of Allied air power, reach their full fruition first," he deliberately starved the navy of air support that might have greatly reduced shipping losses in 1942-43 (p. 265). He concentrated instead on the strategic bombing of Germany, the results of which he and others greatly overestimated. As Bell notes, Churchill was willing to accept heavier than necessary shipping losses if it freed up resources for other critical purposes, including the dispatch of ground forces to North Africa. Yet the diversion of aircraft to strategic bombing only delayed victory in the Atlantic. In fact, it was Churchill's Anti-U-boat Warfare Committee that recommended the modest numbers of VLR (Very Long Range) Liberator bombers that eventually closed the mid-Atlantic

"gap" where U-boats had feasted on Allied shipping until the summer of 1943.

Scholars and Churchill buffs alike will be pleased that the iconic leader emerges from this thorough reexamination with his "reputation generally enhanced" (p. 7). In Bell's judgment, Churchill was "better equipped than any other statesman of this period" to understand Britain's changing strategic needs and to "make reasonable and informed choices" in an era defined "by inadequate and declining resources" (p. 341).

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Citation: J. Garry Clifford. Review of Bell, Christopher M. *Churchill and Sea Power*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

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