

H-Net Reviews

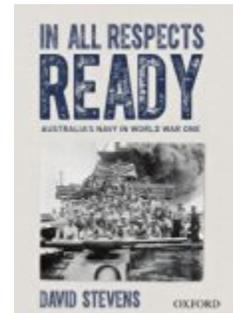
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Stevens. *In All Respects Ready: Australia's Navy in World War One*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xiv + 469 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-557858-4.

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In All Respects Ready, by David Stevens, is a remarkably comprehensive narrative of the Australian navy in the Great War. Making use of a breadth of archives, Stevens has managed to chart the course of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) across the globe in the service of empire and self-defense, while also drawing attention to specific ships and even individuals. The text features a considerable number of photographs and maps. Stevens has brought together exhaustive research and a sensitivity to the subject from his time as a naval warfare officer. For the historian interested in the Australian navy, it is hard to imagine a work comparable in scope.

One of the most significant objectives of the book is to expand understanding of Australia's role in the Great War. For many, the story of Australia in the war begins and ends at Gallipoli. Stevens' work demonstrates that Australian involvement was much more varied than a single campaign. The RAN, in particular, played a meaningful and wide-ranging role in the war. Australia operated in local and Pacific waters, but also traveled to East Africa, the Mediterranean, the North Atlantic, and the West Indies. The chapters are mainly organized by geography and tell the story of the RAN in a particular part of the globe. Each chapter also features a short biography of a notable serviceman. Accounts of specific battles, from historians and sailors, paint a fairly vivid image and the accompanying photographs add to the human dimension.

Stevens suggests that "the First World War was as much a maritime war as the Second," and *In All Respects Ready* does much to illuminate the often overlooked maritime aspects of the Great War through the prism of the Australian experience (p. 2). Nearly anyone who picks

up this book will have a better understanding of wartime naval realities, strategies, and objectives. Because the RAN was also in the service of the Royal Navy (RN), this book manages to cover the events in the North Sea, such as the more familiar Battle of Jutland, alongside South Pacific patrols. *In All Respects Ready* does well chronicling the dance between the German navy and its enemies, who were committed in their pursuit but somewhat limited in their ability to track ships, especially compared to later conflicts. Individual chapters may seem a bit detailed for the reader without a passionate interest in Australian history. Yet as the chapters progress, those very details build a strong sense of the wartime technology and challenges. There is an entire chapter dedicated to naval air war. Trench poetry has left many sensitive to the plight of the soldier in the Great War, but fewer are aware of the conditions of the sailor. Pneumonia outbreaks that harmed animals, wooden doors that could turn to deadly splinters if a ship were struck, coal shortages, unreliable wireless stations, and dazzle camouflage were all part of the experience of the war at sea.

In All Respects Ready directly addresses existing discourses and debates within Australian historiography. Stevens disputes the national myth that Australia's participation in the Great War "was somehow a war of choice" (p. 20). He counters that Australia was a target for enemies of Great Britain and points to the persistence of British identity among Australians at the time. Stevens also dismisses "the persistent belief" among Australians that active, rural "recruits needed little training," when the enlistment figures clearly demonstrate that the majority of enlistees were urban (p. 36). *In All Respects Ready* does not perpetuate the image of the "rough and ready" Australian bushman sent out for a fight with little

training, getting by mainly on resourcefulness and bravery. The real-life people in his narrative were brave and resourceful, but also professional and well-trained. Not only does Stevens take on stereotypical images of Australian servicemen; his overarching narrative also takes on the most significant theme in Australian war historiography. World War One has long been regarded as a tipping point in Australian identity, with Gallipoli playing a dramatic role. This book enriches that historical investigation by presenting Australian identity as forged in more than a single, traumatic loss. It was precisely as Australian admirals and commanders successfully and loyally responded to the call of the British Empire that “Australian interests” were identified and clarified. Concerns about maintaining geographic proximity to Australia emerged in the context of the imperial role that the RAN played in the war. Sensitivity to the expanding regional role of Japan, which was not fully shared by the British, helped to delineate an Australian perspective on global politics. *In All Respects Ready* provides an account of the formation of Australian identity which is more diachronic across the war and which includes loyal imperial service, which did not always end in tragedy.

The story of the RAN knits together the ways in which many distant parts of the globe were connected to the First World War, from the Hebrides to the New Hebrides. Ships of the RAN not only functioned at times as part of the RN, but also alongside the Japanese navy. Australian patrols came across German intrigues at the China Station and navigated in and near the waters of neutral powers, like the Dutch and the United States. Accounts of these interactions help to foreground the relations between great powers outside of Europe and to

bring neutrals into the narrative. Australian sailors traveled to East Africa, patrolled New Guinea, and were at the forefront of Anglo-Japanese cooperation. Like studies of Indian soldiers in Africa and Mesopotamia, *In All Respects Ready* reminds readers that imperial connections during the war were not just between metropole and colonies, but also among and between colonies and dominions, as well as among parts of empires which may have desired to have their own empires. British orders to take German New Guinea were accompanied by a reminder that any lands taken would belong to the imperial government when the war was over, “no doubt recalling Queensland’s abortive annexation of Papua in 1883” (p. 32). *In All Respects Ready* is not primarily about the British Empire in the war, but the detailed chronicle of the RAN and its service to the empire could prove useful to many historians of empire.

In All Respects Ready is a detailed, lengthy investigation of Australia’s navy in the war that does great service to the men who served and the often overlooked war at sea. The chief audience of the book will certainly be those with an interest in Australian and/or naval history. However, it has something to offer to historians with limited interest in Australia. In the centennial outpouring of books about the war, the imperial aspects of the war have recently gone from forgotten to vogue. But few of those books have focused on the actual means of imperial connections and the geographic routes involved. It was the sea which connected the various parts of many empires. Britannia had acquired significant landholdings, but “ruled the waves.” Should Great War, imperial, and maritime histories begin to converge more frequently, our understanding of each should be greatly enhanced.

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