
**Reviewed by** Martyn Bennett

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This is a great book. The timing of its publication, coming as it does during the four hundredth anniversary of the Thirty Years’ War, refocuses our attention on the woefully under-researched naval aspects of the “military revolution.” Not since Bernard Capp’s *Cromwell’s Navy: The Fleet and the English Revolution, 1648-1660* (1992) has a work so thoroughly covered the war at sea as this one. The war in the seas around the British Isles was crucial to the progress of the war. This importance has been underlined since the late 1980s when historians began to work on the idea (which would not have come as a shock to authors at that time) that the civil war was a complex of wars across the British Isles and beyond. Transport between the component parts of the three kingdoms or four nations required safe sea passage. The state of inland communications and the sheer weight of the component parts of military logistics, not to mention siege trains, required safe coastal waters. Moreover we know that Charles I envisaged a combined arms approach to the war with Scotland in 1639 and 1640. It is true that his plans came to nothing virtually, but the intention and the strategic vision was there. This all combines to ensure that without the war at sea the civil wars would have been very different affairs.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive study of all aspects of the war at sea. It begins with an introduction to the nature of war at sea. This covers the nature of warfare at sea in terms of weapons and tactics and the type of war fought by British fleets against continental enemies and pirates of various sorts. The chapter concludes with a pertinent study of the growth of national or state navies. Naturally this innovation foreshadows the creation of a “ship money fleet” in England during the 1630s. A study of the volatile relationship between ships and politics follows this chapter naturally and this runs up, equally naturally, to the beginning of the war and Parliament’s dominance of the recently paid-for navy.

Chapter 3 is a detailed view of the war at sea in the first civil war and then two chapters analyze the navies of Parliament in the first civil war in England and Wales, and then the “navies” of the royalists, the Irish Confederation, and the Scots during a somewhat longer period (1642-53), thus encompassing the political and religious divorce of the former allies of the English and Welsh Parliament and the Scots. There follows a chapter covering the revolutionary years, including the counterrevolution in the fleet in 1648, and finally a chapter that explores the outward-facing stage of the republic’s naval power.
Being a schoolboy at heart I would have liked the book to describe in more depth the ships and their armaments, rigging, and crews, with diagrams to match, in the early sections of the book to grasp more fully the nature of the warfare so well portrayed in the main chapters. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of more important material in here: the analysis of the size and composition of fleets is covered in excellent detail, using lists of ships described as belonging to the navy and those of co-opted merchant vessels. The source material is far from complete or consistent, but the authors have developed a workable system for getting some grasp on the seasonal size of Parliament’s fleets, which enables a greater understanding of what the royalists were up against during the war. The sea war, the authors demonstrate, was not confined to coastal waters, as there were actions at sea as far away as the Azores and in the West Indies too. Perhaps the most surprising conclusion is that Parliament, which commanded the greater portion of the fleet and crucial naval dockyards, was put under great pressure by the royalists during the first civil war against the odds.

The Confederation of Kilkenny had to start from scratch. There was no independent Irish navy for them to try and seize and no homegrown expertise in the early days of the war. A naval administration modeled on that in England was set up. War at sea conducted by the Kilkenny government, however, depended a great deal on private enterprise, and in form it was an exercise in running fast ships to avoid capture while also seizing enemy ships—something at which the Irish-based ships were very good at. Once again the Westminster Parliament with its apparently overwhelming collection of assets was beset by failure.

In terms of the Scottish naval contribution to the wars, the relevant section is brief. The authors contend that this aspect of the war at sea initially owed much to clan rivalries and thus much naval action took the form of seaborne raids on rival territories. Indeed the Scots complained to, or warned, Westminster that their seas were largely unguarded against actions by royalist ships and against threats to the west coast posed by Irish rebels. It was a point hammered home when Alistair MacColla landed an expeditionary force in the West in 1644.

This is an excellent book. It demonstrates a great deal of careful, and moreover, thoughtful research into a subject that needs to have more attention from civil war historians, naval historians, and the historians of the illusive “military revolution.” It is a broadside to our complacency in ignoring the naval aspects of a collection of seaborne nations and hopefully the signal gun for a surge of interest and further work.
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