



The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity 1919–22: Naval and Foreign Policy under Lloyd George by G.H. Bennett.

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The British Royal Navy between the First and Second World Wars has been much studied. The scholarship has long been dominated by Stephen Roskill's groundbreaking account¹ of British naval policy of the time and the Royal Navy's struggle to maintain its dominance relative to the US Navy. Other historians have focused on the international treaties limiting the construction of various classes of warships.² More recent work has disputed the standard view of the Royal Navy's interwar decline or offered more nuanced analyses of the Admiralty's machinations in response to the challenges presented by the United States' 1916 decision to build a navy "second to none."³

In *The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity 1919–22*, historian G.H. Bennett (Plymouth Univ.) offers a comprehensive case study of the Royal Navy during the postwar administration of Prime Minister David Lloyd George. His central argument is that "the same kind of connections between naval and foreign policy (what a nation can and cannot do), the provision of ships for the Royal Navy, business and regional prosperity and employment were just as evident after the First World War as they are in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century" (xiii). He adopts "a multifaceted approach rooted in political and naval history but opening up new and cutting-edge debates in other areas of historical study to transform traditional debates" (xiv).

Great Britain in 1919–22 saw Japan as posing the greatest threat to its maritime security and the Royal Navy. However, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance Treaty of 1902, which linked Britain and Japan, was up for renewal in 1921. Unlike Roskill, Bennett contends that

sacrificing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was central to the evolution of naval policy in the immediate post-war period.... [I]n the aftermath of the First World War the Royal Navy faced a number of closely connected challenges which impacted the outlook of a service which was not of one voice or of one mind. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the danger of a future war with the Japanese intersected with a number of these problems, provoking heated debate within the Cabinet and the ranks of those responsible for British naval policy. Reluctantly in 1921 a consensus was arrived at whereby sacrificing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and living with the dangers of an antagonistic Japan, was [sic] seen as the least worst way to resolve a series of policy dilemmas. (10)

The book begins with a review of British Naval policies in the years before and during the Great War. Bennett notes that Britons were proud of the Royal Navy and supported the significant financial commitments made during the prewar naval arms race with Germany. Nevertheless, the growing

1. *Naval Policy between the Wars*, vol. 1: *The Period of Anglo-American Antagonism* (1968; rpt. NY: Garland, 1979).

2. E.g., Erik Goldstein and John H. Maurer, eds., *The Washington Conference, 1921–22: Naval Rivalry, East Asian Stability and the Road to Pearl Harbor* (Portland, OR: F. Cass, 1994); John H. Maurer and Christopher M. Bell, eds., *At the Crossroads between Peace and War: The London Naval Conference of 1930* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2013).

3. See, e.g., Donald J. Lisio, *British Naval Supremacy and Anglo-American Antagonisms, 1914–1930* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2014), on Great Britain's naval and diplomatic strategies and actions before and during the 1927 Geneva Naval Conference.

recognition that Britain could not “go it alone” in the face of increasing naval competition led to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902, which “marked a decisive move towards a more defensive policy, and away from the neo-imperial isolationism which had dominated British thinking during the late nineteenth century” (23). The dire economic impact of the First World War and the Royal Navy’s failure to achieve an expected crushing victory at sea over Imperial Germany made Britain’s government and citizenry less willing to bear the costs of maintaining the Royal Navy’s supremacy, as the old, almost unquestioning political support for the Navy eroded in the aftermath of the war. Therefore, Britain sought to eliminate or mitigate the threats posed to its security by other powers.

The Admiralty had monitored with some alarm the unfolding of Japan’s post-war building programme They viewed with perhaps even greater alarm the rapid development of the US Navy. On the diplomatic level the British government needed to come up with a deal to check the growing antagonisms between Britain, the United States and Japan. On the political level the Lloyd George government needed to come up with the means to appease the hard-pressed taxpayer. On a departmental level the Royal Navy needed a means to respond to the American-Japanese threat and the dangers of an ageing and unmodernized fleet. (84–85)

The immediate postwar expansion of Britain’s shipbuilding industry, fueled by demand for merchant ships, collapsed in 1920–21, leaving many workers unemployed and depressing the local economies of shipbuilding cities. Britain still had no definitive naval policy to address these interconnected problems.

Shortly after he became First Lord of the Admiralty in early 1921, Lord Lee of Fareham, realizing that there was simply no rational prospect of Britain and the United States going to war, suggested that “The Anglo-Japanese Alliance had become the diplomatic counter required to secure agreement with the US government on naval arms so as to maintain equality of size between the British and American Fleets” (112–13).

Bennett next turns to the decision in summer 1921 to order four new battlecruisers. He stresses that the awarding of these contracts was no panacea for British shipbuilders. At the Washington Naval Conference in late 1921, Great Britain agreed to naval parity with the United States while still seeming to maintain good relations with Japan. But this treaty “created a gap in Britain’s naval capabilities that would require additional governmental expenditure to close” (135). The orders for the four battlecruisers had to be canceled in the face of spending cuts stipulated by the Geddes Committee in early 1922 and the Washington Treaty’s allowance of only two new capital ships completed by 1925. Those cancellations brought down the Lloyd George government in October 1922 and gave the Labour Party victories in the elections of the following November.

Bonar Law’s new Conservative government managed to secure the construction of the two ships permitted under the Washington Treaty. “It was a case of just enough and just in time to preserve necessary military capabilities and the industrial infrastructure of Great Britain” (155). To avert an expensive naval arms race with the United States and Japan, Britain strove to remain on good terms with both countries, despite the expiry of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1923. Bennett asserts that these substantial achievements for the Royal Navy and the Admiralty were compromised in the years leading up to the Second World War.

G.H. Bennett has made a persuasive case that the network of relationships that “crossed government, politics, private sector and communities ... made highly difficult the resolution of the series of issues which lay at the heart” (176) of British naval policy in the early 1920s. Those same issues, he writes, confront present-day politicians in Great Britain and the United States (among others), as they seek to balance modernization and expansion of their naval power to meet new global threats while

satisfying domestic economic and political agendas. Thus, *The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity* is not just an astute academic case study of post-World War I British naval policy, it is a book very relevant to policy decisions being made today.