

# The Navy and the Nation: The Influence of the Navy on Modern Australia

David Stevens and John Reeve (Editors)

Reviewed by David Campbell

Naval people are fond of reminding their fellow citizens (not that they much care to listen) that Australia was discovered, founded and protected by sailors. This is perfectly true but, as if that is not enough and as this book explores, sailors have also made a much broader contribution to Australian society. The sub-title captures the thought: *The Influence of the Navy on Modern Australia*.

*The Navy and the Nation* is a set of 19 essays, most of which were originally delivered at the third King-Hall Naval History Conference, held in Canberra in 2003. The essays are gathered and presented in four parts, each a major facet of Australian life and the role of the Navy in shaping it. So we have, for example, 'Ships, industry and technology for Australia' discussed by five disparate authors. This discussion is even more topical today than two years ago because of its special relevance to the current shipbuilding climate. David Wyllie comments from the eminence of DSTO and Geoff Cannon, from the perspective of a serving Weapons Electrical Engineering Officer, on the complexities of configuration management and the challenges associated with the ownership of intellectual property. As John Jeremy remarks in the context of building HMAS *Success*, naval construction is an enterprise 'not without its problems'. In a later Part, Chris Clark, the RAAF Historian, again ventures into naval waters and offers a paper based on his acclaimed biography of Vice-Admiral Sir William Clarkson, whose position as the builder of the RAN, literally, is vastly under-appreciated today, even in the Navy – and particularly by engineers.

Other contributors include the familiar local and overseas naval historians (Tom Frame, James Goldrick, Geoffrey Till and David Hobbs) who make up the solid backbone of this genre in Australia and whose essays on this occasion span 'straight' history, personalities, geo-politics and carrier-air. They're supported by an outstanding team such as Judith Harley, who writes of her maternal grandfather, Alfred Deakin (who almost became a midshipman), and Surgeon Commander Neil Westphalen who tackles the spectrum from scurvy to hyperbaric medicine. And, as usual, David Stevens and John Reeve have collaborated in a masterful fashion to pull it all together, apart from their own respective offerings on the specifics of the battle cruiser *Australia* and the generalities of maritime nations. Ian Pfennigwerth makes his welcome debut as a naval historian with a piece on ex-naval people in the wider community.

The essays by Colin Jones (sailors as citizens and vice versa), Bob Nicholls (hydrography, especially of the

Great Barrier Reef) and Robert Crawford (naval imagery in the popular press) underscore the fact that there is no aspect of Australian life that has not had a naval influence – medicine, politics, letters, commerce, music, education, technology. (Those examined are by no means exhaustive: I can think of other fields from wine-making through entertainment to space exploration. Did you know, for example, that the good Dr Henry Lindemann, RN (Retd), named his famous Orlando after his old ship on the Australia Station?) And all this from less than one percent of the population! There's surely ample scope for another conference on the same theme.

Although, of course, the subject matter is parochially Australian, the context is global. George Baer and Jan Ruger provide a distant perspective from overseas and Peter Edwards' chapter on naval diplomacy neatly bridges the two extremes.

The text is well illustrated with some 50 black and white photos and a few cartoons from the *Bulletin*. There is a brief but adequate index. There are some irritating proof-reading and editing errors (including the *lese-majeste* misspelling of David Stevens' name in the cataloguing entry) but they do not significantly detract from an otherwise very attractively presented volume.

I like this book and recommend it unreservedly. It is much more than a good read: it is an important book in its own right and a genuinely significant contribution to understanding the Australian nation. It is a close call, but I regard it as the best of the proceedings of the very successful series of King-Hall conferences, which are now firmly established as an important feature in the calendar of contemporary historical scholarship.

In the National Portrait Gallery in London there is a photograph by Bassano of Admiral Sir George Fowler King-Hall taken in 1926 (he had retired in 1913). In it, the admiral seems to have an expression of immense satisfaction. I like to imagine he was contemplating his prediction of 'a great naval power in the Pacific', 'a national force and one supported by the nation wholeheartedly and without reserve.' It is a relationship that is fully and warmly reciprocated, as this book very effectively demonstrates. ♦

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