



### Castles of Steel: Britain, Germany, and the Winning of the Great War at Sea

**Robert K. Massie**

**Reviewed by Commodore Jack McCaffrie**

Robert Massie is a Pulitzer prize-winning author of biographies and naval history. *Castles of Steel* follows his earlier work *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War*, as an equally fascinating account of the naval war at sea between 1914 and 1918. *Castles of Steel* combines a generally chronological narrative with character sketches of many of the principal actors and personal descriptions of significant events. It is this approach which makes the book stand apart from the very many others that cover some, or all, of the naval aspects of World War I.

At 865 pages, the book is a substantial volume. But it is an easy and sometimes compelling read. The narrative flows very well and is certainly enhanced by the frequent personal accounts of battles—whether at sea or within the British and German war Cabinets.

The bibliography is extensive and contains many biographical and autobiographical works from both sides of the conflict. The author's approach to footnoting is somewhat unusual and perhaps unique. There are no footnotes as such; merely abbreviated quotes from the text, listed by chapter and page number at the end of the book, with brief descriptions of the source document and page number. Most readers will not be concerned by this, but those wanting to read more deeply will find it annoying.

*Castles of Steel* describes the significant aspects of the naval war between Britain and Germany, but with most emphasis on the British perspective. It begins in the Mediterranean, with the chase and escape of the *Goeben* in August 1914, and concludes with the ignominious end of the German High Seas Fleet; first with the mutinies at the end of hostilities, and then with the scuttling of the ships in Scapa Flow in June 1919.

In between, there are detailed accounts of operations by both navies in the North Sea, including the German raids on the East coast of England, the blockade of Germany and submarine operations by both sides.

Specific attention is paid to the German deliberations, and American and British responses, to what became the unrestricted submarine warfare campaign.

Throughout the book there are also chapters devoted to the individuals who played major roles in the naval war and their relationships. So, on the German side most attention is paid to Kaiser William II, Admiral Tirpitz and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, together with Admirals Scheer and Hipper. Possibly the most interesting descriptions relate to the German submarine campaign, considerations of likely British and American responses to it, and eventual German expressions of disregard. These descriptions include good coverage of the international legal issues at play and the political judgments made by the leaders of each country. Readers will feel sympathy for Bethmann-Hollweg and his attempts to dissuade William, who eventually found his military advisers more persuasive.

On the British side, most attention is paid to Admirals Jellicoe, Beatty and Fisher, as well as Winston Churchill in his time as First Lord of the Admiralty. The relationship between Fisher (as First Sea Lord) and Churchill, initially very warm but destined for destruction, is very well described. Massie's contrasting characterisations of Jellicoe and Beatty are noteworthy. He is harsher on Beatty and his admittedly interesting personal life. He is if anything, a little too understanding of Jellicoe's defensiveness, unwillingness to delegate and sometimes excessive loyalty to underperforming subordinates.

A significant portion of the book is devoted to three campaigns; Coronel and the Falklands, the Dardanelles and, of course, Jutland, with each being given five chapters. The treatment of each is comprehensive, although Australian readers may be disappointed by the offhand description of the sinking of the *Emden*. Nevertheless, each of these campaigns and the political and strategic issues accompanying

them is described masterfully.

As an example, the descriptions of Admiral Sturdee, his relationship with Fisher and his appointment to lead the hunt for Spee in the South Atlantic are both vivid and revealing. Furthermore, his account of the battle of the Falklands and of the destruction and sinking of the *Scharnhorst* is genuinely stirring, yet at the same time sobering. Similarly, Massie explains well the genesis of the Dardanelles campaign and the lack of resolution that accompanied its planning and conduct. Finally, he identifies all of the now well known and analysed aspects of Jutland, evoking in this reader at least, a sense of frustration at the many missed Royal Navy opportunities on the night of that battle.

As might be expected in such a wide-ranging work, several themes run through *Castles of Steel*. Of these, two in particular are noteworthy. The first is the extent to which Britain, and the Royal Navy especially, were let down by poor communications—in the widest sense of that word. At the national level, political direction was sometimes unclear, or at least ambiguously transmitted. The instructions to Troubridge in the operation against the *Goeben* and the differences among the Army, the Navy and the Cabinet over the Dardanelles campaign highlight this.

Operationally, the situation was often much worse. Massie identifies any number of occasions on which poor tactical communications cost Britain dearly. Beatty's failure to keep Evan-Thomas's battle squadron informed of his intentions and to keep Jellicoe and the Grand Fleet informed of the enemy's position during the afternoon of Jutland, are probably the most significant examples but, regrettably, there are others. These failings were sometimes the result of inadequate technology, as in the inability to get messages to Cradock off South America, and sometimes the result of human failings, as in the case of the hapless Lieutenant Commander Seymour (Beatty's Flag Lieutenant) at Jutland and on other occasions.

The result, clearly outlined by Massie, was missed opportunities on a scale that almost defies belief. This was doubly disappointing in view of the constant access that the Royal Navy had to German naval signal traffic. This access could not always be translated into timely and usable information, but neither was best advantage gained from it.

On the other hand, the German Navy at a tactical level did not seem to suffer as badly as did the British. Nevertheless, the fact that the Royal Navy was reading their message traffic did not seem to have occurred to them. The consequences could have been much worse.

The quality of leadership, especially the Royal Navy leadership, is the second major and constant theme. As they are portrayed by Massie, several of the Royal Navy's most senior officers were less than inspirational, and all too often lacked initiative. The names Milne,

Goodenough, Moore and Pelly come to mind.

Beatty, for all his dash, failed to provide any guidance to Evan-Thomas when his battleship squadron joined the battlecruisers at Rosyth before Jutland. But, neither is there any evidence that Evan-Thomas sought any guidance. Even the consummately professional Jellicoe was perhaps too cautious and even pessimistic for his own good.

Perhaps Britain expected too much from its Navy and its Nelsonian traditions. After such a long peacetime interlude and with so much depending on the Grand Fleet maintaining numerical superiority over the High Seas Fleet, initiative and risk-taking may have come to be seen as the same thing. While Massie does a good job of cataloguing the issue, anyone looking for a thoughtful explanation of the development of Royal Navy leadership in that era should read Andrew Gordon's *The Rules of the Game*.

There are several other important themes throughout the book, including the impact of submarines, mines and to a lesser extent, aircraft, on capital ship operations. One theme that should not be forgotten and that appears frequently throughout the book, is the exceptional personal courage displayed by officers and sailors on both sides.

*Castles of Steel* is certainly a great read, but it is not without its flaws. It is sparsely illustrated and while photographs may be neither here nor there, the lack of maps (there are only six and they are fairly stark) is a definite shortcoming. Further, on checking several factual details with both the Corbett and Newbolt official history, and the Marder history, there is evidence of inaccuracies in Massie's work. These may be of little consequence, but more seriously, in describing Jellicoe's removal from the position of First Sea Lord he paints a somewhat one-sided picture of both the process and of the lead-up to it. The Marder account, for example, makes clear why Lloyd George became increasingly unhappy with Jellicoe, without in any way approving of the manner of the dismissal. This reader was, therefore, left with some nagging doubts as to the book's overall accuracy and objectivity.

The real strength of this book is that it is a very easily read account of World War I at sea. But *Castles of Steel* is by no means a definitive account of the war at sea and it provides no new insights on its conduct. As such, it is unlikely to satisfy historians. The vast majority of readers, however, will find *Castles of Steel* very rewarding; not least for the personal dimension it gives to this history. Those who are tempted to read more will find many worthy books listed in Massie's bibliography. ♦

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