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Jonathan R. Dull, *The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British and French Navies, 1650-1815* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009). 268 pp. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-0-8032-1930-4.

Review by Alan James, King's College, London

There is nobody better qualified to provide a brief survey of eighteenth-century naval warfare and international relations than Jonathan Dull who recognises better than anyone the central role played by the French Navy. His expertise in matters Gallic and his own personal equidistance and fondness for both Britain and France, which he declares in the preface, brings a refreshing balance. France is portrayed here as the looming giant against whom others fought and which, therefore, played an active, and not simply a passive, doomed role in creating the age of the ship of the line. As those readers familiar with his previous work would expect, the value of this book is not simply in its mastery of navies and naval warfare but in the apparent ease with which the histories of the two great protagonists of the age are woven into a sophisticated account of European politics and diplomacy.

Dull is a master at linking seemingly disparate events and at contextualising them within broader political and military developments. With this book, he has produced a very readable, compact survey of naval history with a useful, informed set of notes and recommendations for further reading. It is, in short, an excellent introduction to the subject for the non-specialist, never assuming too much knowledge. At the same time, it is a handy summary of Dull's perspective on events, which is extremely valuable for those readers with more developed interests in naval history, virtually all of whom, it is safe to assume, regard his work with considerable respect.

Inevitably, relative judgements are made, and Dull puts his finger on the source of British strength. Put simply, "Britain's system of government permitted it to raise money more easily than did France" (p. 180). With greater involvement in government and, generally, a greater personal stake in maritime activity, the well-off British subject was more willing to pay for naval warfare than his French equivalent. This broad alignment of interest between the government and the seafaring community is widely recognised as the key to long-term success. Yet Dull is also able to recognise the weaknesses of the British system. In an age of wars 'of attrition fought for limited objectives' British taxpayers could demand more by way of results and display less patience. Thus 'none of the wars before the Napoleonic War established permanent naval superiority', and the victories they did enjoy brought fleeting advantages (p. 181). Such even handedness makes this an exceptional history of eighteenth-century naval warfare.

All good books prompt further reflection, however, and it is hoped that what follows will be taken more as a reflection of the reviewer's own thoughts than a direct criticism of the book. Yet for all of Dull's fairness, there is still an occasional and slightly puzzling lack of empathy with France which seems out of place. We are told, for example, that many of the troubles of Louis Quatorzien France could have been avoided quite simply "had Louis been wiser" (p. 20). The assumption is that what France should have sought was 'secure borders' and that what it did seek, instead, was ill-advised. Louis XIV, unfortunately, 'treated Spain as if it were France's natural enemy ... because he did not have the imagination to escape from

conventional wisdom' (p. 20). In other words, for Dull there is a set logic to French foreign policy which the monarchy could have chosen to ignore or to follow.

Historians of early modern France, on the other hand, might not find the choice of Spain as enemy that puzzling in light of the fact that for the first twenty-one years of his life Louis XIV was at war with Spain, a war he had inherited from his father. With his marriage which sealed the peace of 1659 he was in a position, eventually realised, to place a Bourbon on the Spanish throne. If all had gone well, this would have satisfied centuries of French policy and with a success beyond the wildest imaginations of all previous French kings. It would have been an unconventional wisdom, to say the least, if in his adult life he chose to turn his back on the opportunity in order to contest naval supremacy with England or simply to secure his borders. Indeed, the only thing that could make England seem a more natural enemy at the time is hindsight.

There is some truth in the observation that in the reigns of the three French kings in question "each made the same mistake, attacking a neighbouring state without just cause. Each enjoyed some initial success but then was trapped in a cycle of violence and financial expense that he came to regret" (p. 10). Yet it carries with it similarly potentially anachronistic assumptions about legality and judgement. France poses difficulties for historians of international relations in this period because it pursued interests that were largely defined by long-held notions of its international role as defender of European peace and Catholic order and, precisely, by matters of legality and honour. Dull is undoubtedly correct to take the fantastically expensive and unfathomably complex ship-of-the-line as "the measure of strength" of states in an age when statesmen increasingly saw war as a "contest of economies, in which victory went to the strongest."

Yet the claim that ideology "played virtually no role" after 1715 is something that would have to be demonstrated rather than merely asserted (pp. vii-viii, 185). Dull makes an interesting case, portraying eighteenth-century Britain and France as naturally conservative with more to fear from expansionist powers like Russia or Prussia than from each other. However, a more flexible set of working assumptions about international order and greater sensitivity to differences in naval, maritime, or colonial aims (not just between Britain and France but between different administrations within a country) might have made the book more attractive to readers outside the field of naval history. Certainly, it would be a shame if the readership is restricted to naval enthusiasts. As Dull is clearly aware, and indeed as anyone with a developed academic interest in naval history is aware, naval warfare was a significant part of the social, economic, military and even intellectual history of the century.

To be fair, a book of this length, and with such a clearly defined purpose, does not provide the opportunity to pursue such lines of thought fully. Dull must be thanked for his work on the French navy, which has done so much to balance the naval history of the eighteenth century, and he should be congratulated for writing this pithy and authoritative overview.

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