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## Book Review: The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British & French Navies, 1650-1815

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Jonathan R. Dull, *The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British & French Navies, 1650-1815*. University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 260 pp. Maps, diagrams, notes, index.

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Well-known naval historian Jonathan R. Dull has produced *The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British & French Navies, 1650-1815* for the “Studies in War, Society, and the Military” series published by the University of Nebraska Press. His book is a welcome and concise source of information. Military historians will find data about the numbers of ships in each navy for each period covered. Diplomatic historians will find brief descriptions of the various heads of state and the ministers whose decisions led to wars, victories, defeats, and economic disasters.

*The Age of the Ship of the Line* begins with a chapter about the technical aspects of fighting ships around the year 1650, and about the tactic known as the “line of battle.” Dull notes that the maximum size of ships was limited by the sizes of trees from which mainmasts and sternposts were constructed. Between 1650 and 1815, the ships changed little, until the screw propeller and steam engine were introduced. According to the author, most battles were decided by superior numbers of ships. “It was rare,” writes Dull, “for a fleet of superior size to suffer a decisive defeat.” Fleet sizes fluctuated according to many factors. Ships did not last more than twelve or fifteen years before they had to be replaced. Countries would build up for war, but wars were expensive, and they were tiresome to tax payers, so large fleets were transitory.

Succeeding chapters chronicle the wars of Louis XIV, culminating in the War of the Spanish Succession, and the “foolish wars” that Britain involved itself in during the first decades of the 1700s. Dull describes the diplomatic maneuvering, economic factors, and domestic squabbles that led to naval battles. Count the many players and factors mentioned in the following paragraph, for example.

Walpole’s hopes for a peaceful resolution of British-Spanish disputes...were foiled, however, and the public finally got the war it wished, the so-called War of Jenkins’s Ear. This reversal of fortune was caused by the greed of the South Sea Company, ...the opportunism of Newcastle, who in order to court popularity decided to keep a British fleet of ten ships of the line in the Mediterranean even though the Spaniards had demobilized their fleet, and the pride of Philip V, who responded to this insult by breaking off negotiations, thereby making war inevitable.

Dull thus portrays a Europe of opportunistic countries and officials, ready to attack almost any other country whenever it became vulnerable. Alliances would form for a few years only to dissolve after any decisive military campaign caused a shift in the balance of power. Wars were fought for booty, for trade, for personal or national ambition, and for vengeance. Before Napoleon, they were wars of attrition, fought for limited objectives.

Next, two very strong chapters are based partly on Dull's books *The French Navy and the Seven Years' War* (University of Nebraska Press, 2005) and *The French Navy and American Independence* (Princeton University Press 1975). They cover wars on an intercontinental scale. The French and Indian War, followed by the Seven Years' War, illustrate the heavy costs and the diplomatic difficulties of colonialism. Governments of both Britain and France tended to leave the details of controlling their possessions to colonial governors. France, with colonies in Canada and Louisiana, had to protect its trade routes down the Wabash and Maumee Rivers to the Ohio and the Mississippi. But their forts, built between Lake Erie and what is now Pittsburgh (where the Ohio River forms), upset not only the many Native American tribes who lived there, but also the British. French forces defeated George Washington's militia in 1754. But unfortunately for the French, the British Navy in 1754 happened to be far larger than the French Navy.

The British "victory" in the French and Indian War and in the Seven Years' War caused France to lose its presence in India; territory in Canada; parts of Louisiana; and Martinique in the West Indies. But the losses were something of a blessing, for they were burdens that Britain and Spain now had to carry. France retained its access to northern fisheries, and to sugar and timber in the West Indies, which would help France to rebuild its navy. Dull writes, "In the British victory lay the seeds of defeat; in the ruins of French defeat lay the seeds of future victory."

After a chapter on the war of American independence, Dull finishes his book with chapters on the French Revolution, on the role of the navies in the Napoleonic Wars, and, finally, his concluding chapter, in which he reviews the almost endless hostilities between Britain and France during the long 18<sup>th</sup> century. His conclusion is that Britain and France had more interests in common than not. Their fear of each other could have been set aside, and they could have allied themselves to deal with European powers and borders to their mutual benefit. That they did not do so makes writing history more interesting, says Dull, but caused their own citizens to suffer from unnecessary warfare



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