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Forget the Scots; it was the

By MARK PROUDMAN
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SUB

To Rule the Waves:
How the British Navy
Shaped the Modern World
By Arthur Herman
HarperCollins, 645 pages, \$37.95

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Arthur Herman, a former professor of history at Georgetown University and author of the bestselling book *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*, has performed a similar service for the Royal Navy: This volume's subtitle, *How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World*, captures its central message.



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It is a message that is correct, relevant and likely to be ignored in many quarters. Naval power has been a core component of political, economic and cultural power since the Minoans cleared the Aegean Sea of pirates, an event described by Thucydides, himself an Athenian admiral. Sea power found its canonical theorist in the late Victorian American officer A. T. Mahan, whose conclusions about the predominant power of blue-water fleets were quickly vitiated by the progress of technology. But Mahan was right that command of the sea, and hence of international trade, is a key element of international power.

Mahan based his argument on a study of British naval campaigns against the Dutch in the 17th century and the French in the 18th. Herman covers much of the same ground, though he begins a century earlier, with the Elizabethan roots of English maritime power, and time has given him another century of great battles and eventual decline to cover at the end of his story. But where Mahan had a clear didactic purpose -- he wanted the U.S. Congress to fund a first-class fleet, but

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unfortunately found his most devoted student in Germany's Kaiser -- Herman is content merely to advertise the historical importance of his protagonist, the Royal Navy.

Like the Scots whose centrality Herman emphasized in his previous book, the Royal Navy had much to do with the creation of our English-speaking, culturally Anglo-Saxon, free-trading world. Indeed, like the Scots, the navy had much to do with the development of constitutional government, the taxes that paid for it -- "ship money" -- being a leading cause of the English Civil War.

Herman tells a good yarn: His story is full of famous names and old battles, and he does a good job of connecting those historical highlights to wider political and economic trends. He begins with Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh, pirates and slave traders licensed by Queen Elizabeth to attack her Spanish enemies and, ideally, steal their silver. Robert Blake and Oliver Cromwell envied the Dutch their trade and colonies, and succeeded in taking much of it. Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, created the permanent organization to pay for, maintain and administer the sea-going force that made England a great power.

Lord Nelson disregarded orders and kept the fleet waiting while he tarried with another man's wife, but he was a great tactician, and he was also lucky -- something that his enemy Napoleon demanded of his own marshals. At the Nile, Copenhagen, St. Vincent and (of course) Trafalgar, Nelson and his "band of brothers" raised the Royal Navy to the kind of global primacy in its element now enjoyed only by the U.S. Air Force.

The Royal Navy of the early 20th century was a slightly more bureaucratic, more regular and better regulated institution than it had been under Nelson, but it found in the Kaiser's fleet an adversary technically superior, although less audaciously led. Its victory at Jutland was narrow but strategically decisive. Along with its adjunct, the Royal Canadian Navy, the Royal Navy played a decisive role in the Second World War, securing the sea lanes that allowed the resources of North America to be directed onto the battlefields of Europe through the ports of Murmansk, Liverpool and, later, Antwerp.

The 20th century did not lack for colourful figures of its own, the inevitable and inimitable Winston Churchill chief among them. As a reforming First Lord of the Admiralty before the First World War, he built the modern battleships known as dreadnoughts while dismissing naval tradition as "rum, buggery and the lash." At the beginning of the Second World War, the world-wide signal "Winston is back" told the fleet to expect blood.

Herman concludes with a brief, gently elegiac chapter on the Falklands War of 1982, showing -- as though it had ever been in doubt -- that those who still serve under the White Ensign are as steadfast as their forebears. This is disappointing: His volume covers so many important and even foundational events that some more serious and reflective summation is demanded. Why, indeed, are we told such wonderful, edifying, heart-rending stories if not to lead to some great conclusion, some call to action?

Herman gives us a good and thought-provoking read, but one might wish for more of his own thoughts. He is good with anecdotes and epithets: Walter Raleigh, one of Herman's Elizabethan heroes, an unscrupulous character with an eye for the main chance, was known to his contemporaries as "Sir Walter Raw Lie."

"We must not look to maintain war upon the revenues of England," proclaimed Raw Lie in a rare moment of honest speaking, meaning that the nation's wars should be paid for not from taxes but from the profits of piracy upon the Spanish treasure fleets. We live today in an age that would consider a profitable war to be an outrage, in the unlikely event that we could contrive such a thing. The West has just conquered the globe's richest oil fields, and many of our best people are afraid -- afraid! -- that it may profit us somehow, eventually.

Sir Walter Raleigh would have sold the oil back to the Arabs at a usurious rate of interest. Such are the reflections a patriot in the Raleigh tradition might offer on our current imbroglio, but here we have only bedtime stories, albeit well told ones. Among its other achievements, the British Navy spread around the globe the culture that has made Quakers of us all. Herman leaves the conclusion implicit; Mahan would have spelled it out; Raleigh would have made off with the money.

Mark Proudman is a Canadian who has just completed a doctoral thesis on Victorian imperialism at Oxford University. He may be reached at his email address: mark.proudman@new.ox.ac.uk.

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