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Richard Harding. *The Emergence of Britain's Global Naval Supremacy: The War of 1739-1748.* Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2010. 374 S. $115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-580-6.

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R. Harding: The Emergence of Britain's Global Naval Supremacy

This book focuses almost exclusively on cabinet-level politics, international diplomacy, and military grand strategy. It provides a detailed chronological account of the war, sometimes recounting events hour by hour (on average, each year of the war receives a separate chapter). A more apt title for the book would have been âNavalism and its Limitationsâ. Many politicians cherished the view that navies were cheap and safe as opposed to the standing armies and expensive European entanglements that might put Britain on the road to despotism. Richard Harding is concerned with the practical side of this proposition. Could wars be won without a substantial investment in what we now like to call âboots on the groundâ? Some historians, mesmerized by the navyâs decisive victories in the 1756-1763 conflict, have assumed that âin the 1740s seapower had been wasted, by incompetence and muddled thinking.â (p. 7) Harding sets out to complicate that picture, noting, first, that the navy could never have lived up to the unrealistic expectations placed upon it in 1739, and second, that decision-makers did not display incompetence but faced a risk-fraught and ever-changing environment. Hardingâs essential point is that the naval option did not exist in a vacuum; to determine whether the use of seapower would have a decisive impact, it must be evaluated in the wider context of concurrent events such as land warfare and diplomacy.

Memories of the defeat of the Armada and of the exploits of Elizabethan privateers tantalized war planners with the possibility that Spainâs far-flung empire remained vulnerable to attack from the sea. A naval blockade had forced concessions from Spain as recently as 1726. Declaring war on Spain with âmassive expectations of quick victory based on naval powerâ (p. 6) in 1739, Britain found herself instead drawn into a larger conflict, fighting France as well as Spain, and obligated to support Maria Theresa in the War of the Austrian Succession, a conflict that put George IIâs cherished Hanover close to the center of diplomatic and military action. The governmentâs tortured maneuvers to protect its German-speaking possession provoked bitter debate in Parliament about âPatrioticâ versus âHanoverianâ interests. Meanwhile, the Spanish grip on the Americas did not loosen, and major naval victories occurred too late in the war to exercise a decisive influence over the timing, or the terms, of the peace treaty. The assumption that command of the sea would shield Britain itself from any serious attempt at invasion while it pursued gains elsewhere also proved incorrect. The Jacobite advance from Scotland, combined with French invasion fleets mustering just offshore, briefly posed a threat to London itself.

The need to counter both French and Spanish fleets meant that âfrom being primarily an offensive force in 1739/40, with a focus on the Caribbean, the Royal Navy had, by the end of 1741, been forced to move to a more defensive posture with a Mediterranean focus.â (p. 122) Even in these southern European waters, admirals were sometimes under orders to take no action for diplomatic reasons, which is hardly evidence for the impotence of seapower, but points rather to the complexity of Britainâs balancing act as it protected Hanover while prosecuting

the wider war. (p. 118) British planners concluded that âthe best way of controlling France was to have 80,000 men in Flandersâ (p. 89), threatening Paris. Harding could have made this point succinctly, but instead the land campaigns in Flanders muscle aside the naval war within the pages of his book, just as they did in real life; no less than eleven different detailed maps show the maneuverings of the rival armies in this tiny area, whereas the minimalist sketches of âThe West Indiesâ and âSpanish Imperial Trade Routesâ offer little to the reader.

Naval power might achieve exciting raids and captures, as Admiral Vernon demonstrated early in the war, but the toll of tropical diseases made it difficult to hold Spanish ports for long. By 1743, the only Spanish soil captured and still retained in the Caribbean was âthe little island of Roatan in the Gulf of Honduras,â tenuously held by a mutiny-prone garrison of American troops. (p. 167) The return to a maritime emphasis came only after victory in Flanders seemed impossible. News of the unexpected capture of Louisbourg in North America spurred debate over the possibility of forcing France to the negotiating table using overseas exploits alone. (p. 262) Using seapower to convey an invasion force to take Quebec seemed promising, but the possibility of further French attempts to invade across the English Channel made it seem imprudent to send large numbers of troops so far away. A bold stroke in North America was certainly an option, but it might have been met with an even more devastating riposte in Europe.

Despite the word âglobalâ in the title, developments beyond the shores of the Atlantic receive limited attention; a late remark on the jubilation in London that French schemes had been foiled in both America and India (p. 318) comes as a surprise, since events on the Asian front of the war had not been brought to the readerâs attention. A thoughtful account of the debate over whether the first blow against the Spanish should come at the Philippine port of Manila or at the South American port of Cartagena (pp. 60-65) is an honorable exception to this neglect of Asia, though Britainâs long-term strategic plans for a captured Manila (if they existed) are not discussed.

While Harding occasionally cites historiography in French and Spanish, his archival work and his secondary reading are overwhelmingly in English-language sources alone. His focus remains consistently on the internal debates within the British political elite and the options available to them at any given moment, without supplying anything like an equivalent account of the strengths, weaknesses, or strategic objectives of Britainâs enemies. Such a one-sided approach to military or diplomatic history has inherent limitations. Statements such as âFrench naval operations in the West Indies proved remarkably ineffectiveâ (p. 337) and âFrance was becoming war weary as a result of its own confused policyâ (p. 327) appear without adequate explanation or even supporting footnotes.

The American front receives better coverage than events in Asia, but Hardingâs treatment of the new colony in Georgia is representative of his weaknesses here. Georgia is mentioned on several different occasions, but this colony is not named in the index. He mentions the Native American population as one reason why the British would not wage war effectively in the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida. Hardingâs authorities on this matter are books more than thirty years old, and journal articles from 1927 and 1941. (p. 247, note 117). The unsuccessful interactions with potential native allies are an excellent example of how new insights from cultural history and Native American history could redefine our approach to both diplomacy and military affairs, but this opportunity went unnoticed. More broadly, there is little recognition in this volume that non-Europeans may have played a substantive role in this âglobalâ and imperial conflict.

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