

**Adrian G. Marshall, *Nemesis: The First Iron Warship and Her World*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2016. xix + 325pp. ISBN 978-9-9716-9822-5. Paperback. Price £18.50.**

Although the author of this work describes himself as a biologist who rather drifted into an interest of the subject matter, *Nemesis: The First Iron Warship and Her World* is a good read and is highly recommended. Indeed, former University of Aberdeen Professor Marshall's previous publication, the *Singapore Letters of Benjamin Cook 1854-1855* (Landmark Books, 2014) has provided him with a background worldview of the First Opium War (1839-42), with recent research carrying him into such areas as 'gunboat diplomacy' off Borneo in the later 1840s, including bloody, point-blank skirmishes with pirates.

There are relatively few works on gunboats of the Victorian era and these rarely go into such individual detail as presented here. Antony Preston and John Major's *Send a Gunboat!* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1967) began where *Nemesis* leaves off, the Crimean War (1853-56) and the Second Opium War (1856-60), and closed with gunboats which saw action in the First World War; while James Cable's *Gunboat Diplomacy, 1919-1969* (Macmillan Press, 1971), as a further example, carried the larger narrative analysis forward to 'present day'. What Marshall is keen to emphasise are both the 'firsts' (an iron-hulled man-of-war, first to round the Cape of Good Hope, etc.) and that she was not contracted for service in the Royal Navy but for the British East India Company - whose corporate interests were on a collision course with those of the Chinese state. Not only could this paddlewheel-frigate, built in Birkenhead, safely operate in 7-feet of water but her watertight compartments helped mitigate critical damage when holed in combat or run aground. This was a milestone in naval architecture; the Americans following suit three years later with the construction of the USS *Michigan*, pre-fabricated in Pittsburgh and shipped overland for assembly on Lake Erie in 1842. But whereas the *Michigan* scarcely fired a shot in anger, *Nemesis* was immediately plunged into littoral warfare at Chuenpi (7 January 1841). As the author describes, the two 32-pounders of the 'Nevermiss' fired grapeshot 'within a biscuit's throw' of Chinese shore batteries, while her Congreve rockets often took out enemy junks with a single hit. This was "the very first engagement of an iron warship" and the slaughter was immense. British

## REVIEWS

firepower and discipline proved capable of off-setting the vast numerical superiority of an enemy fighting in his own backyard.

And this was only the beginning. Marshall notes that “whereas when the *Nemesis* first set sail from England the P&O [Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company] owned seven ships; by 1855 they had 42” (p246). In the end China could not stem such a tide, as the First Opium War clearly demonstrated—and there were other powers also pressing against her coasts, with expansionist Russia looming to the north. As such, the ‘world’ as represented by *Nemesis* was fraught with bitter contradictions. “And so the British set out for the north, sacking one coastal town after another, a progress likened by the great Chinese scholar Arthur Waley to that of Early Victorian Vikings” (p.114). Yet further down the same page the author observes that “Throughout the conflict with China British leaders were strongly of the opinion that Chinese people unconnected with the government or military forces should not be harassed.” Before long the Indian revolt of 1857 saw the East India Company dissolved and its territories formally taken up by the British Crown, while Royal Navy gunboats carried on against native opposition in China and beyond. On 26 April 1861, the iron-hulled HMS *Brune* proceeded to shell Porto Novo (Benin, West Africa). “One bold stroke given at the right moment,” declared the local British consul, “and justified by a decided act of aggression, will have more influence in putting down the detestable Traffic [in slaves] than any addition we can make to the number of our cruisers” (from the printed Parliamentary report). With the loss of only one man, the British had the town ablaze in under an hour, and “mowed down in dozens” some 500 men futilely resisting from the shore. Yet vowing eternal hatred to the British Empire, the local king undertook protection from Napoleon III two years later; Porto Novo eventually being absorbed into French Dahomey.

This book is lavishly illustrated with 53 black-and-white and colour reproductions, along with 8 maps and 11 table appendices. A story like this is not necessarily a *study*, and therefore it omits an analytical introduction or conclusion. But the endnotes are a weak point, full of over-abbreviations and with, inexplicably, references to book titles or reports without any page numbers listed.

HOWARD J. FULLER  
University of Wolverhampton