

**Stephen Cobb, *Preparing for Blockade 1885-1914, Naval Contingency for Economic Warfare*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. Notes. Index. Bibliography. Maps. Tables. Photographs. Appendices. xxii + 349 pp. ISBN 978-1409434191 (Hardback). Price £80.00.**

In his Foreword, Andrew Lambert praises this book as part of a recent shift in First World War naval historiography away from battleships and fleet actions to providing a 'more sophisticated understanding of policy and strategy' (p. xiii). Ultimately it matters because 'in combination with recent works by Nicholas Lambert and Matthew Seligman, [it] begins to break down the khaki grip on the history of British diplomacy and strategy before 1914' (p. xv). Unfortunately those works came out too recently for Stephen Cobb to use them with much insight. He summarises some of the main points of Nicholas Lambert's seminal, but provocative, *Planning for Armageddon* in a long footnote (pp. 71-2) but does not address his main arguments, especially that before the war the Admiralty saw economic warfare as a means of achieving a quick victory through the collapse of German finance. Lambert is almost certainly wrong, but Cobb accepts without question the traditional view that blockade was designed eventually to bring about German defeat in a long war.

As a revamped thesis, *Preparing for Blockade* has instead quite modest aims. Firstly, Cobb argues that, far from being the concern only of a small number of high-level planners, blockade was an important part of the strategic culture of the service. 'This was what the Royal Navy did' (p. xxi). While no doubt correct, this does not provide much insight into the complicated debates of the period. Cobb piles summary upon summary of memoranda, books and papers, along with the career details of almost everyone who crosses his path. He has little sense of organisation, seldom highlights or links important points and usually loses himself in detail. His readers are left with the task of sorting out what is relevant and important and why.

The book deals with Admiralty plans for the employment of armed merchant cruisers (AMCs). Contrary to some earlier accounts, Cobb shows that this was part of an established policy rather than an *ad hoc* response to the outbreak of the war. His treatment suffers from the same defects of organisation and analysis and Cobb seldom asks questions of his material. Nevertheless, one interesting and important point does emerge. In 1902-3 the Admiralty wanted the shipping companies to build large fast liners as AMCs for trade protection. As these could not be justified commercially, the Admiralty had to pay out large loans and subsidies. Cunard received loans of £1,300,000 both for the *Mauretania* and for the *Lusitania*, which came into service in 1907. Even as these vessels came into service policy shifted and rather than subsidising fast liners, battlecruisers were built at a somewhat higher cost:

£1,750,000 for each of the *Invincibles*. But for blockade the need now 'was for sturdy ships which could keep the northern seas, day-in, day-out apprehending German trade' (p. 242) and it was in this role that most of the armed merchant cruisers served. Such would be the backbone of 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron, whose achievements Cobb celebrates.

While this book has obvious deficiencies, and is largely uncritical of blockade policy, one can hope with Andrew Lambert that it may be part of a larger trend, which should go even further in considering the relation between military and economic strategy. Cobb is probably right in seeing blockade as part of an unreflective can-do tradition in the Royal Navy. Other, less prestigious, departments such as the Board of Trade had different priorities. Nicholas Lambert has made good use of the minutes of the War Trade Advisory Committee to give insights into the tension between military and economic strategies in the first half of the war but neither he nor Cobb notes that more British commercial shipping was lost to Admiralty requisition than to enemy action in that period. The implications of this for Great Britain's role in the world economy deserve more consideration than they have so far received.

PROFESSOR PETER J. YEARWOOD  
University of Papua New Guinea