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REFERENCES


1 Jonathan R. Dull's American Naval History, 1607-1865: Overcoming the Colonial Legacy was published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2012. The author concedes that although many books have been published on the subject of American Naval History, 'a new survey' is necessary, 'particularly one with a broad perspective' (Dull vii). As a result, the central focus of Dull's study as the title indicates is a survey of the United States Navy, spanning from the early colonial era, right through to the American Civil War. It is Dull's central premise in this study, as well as his previously published The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British and French Navies, 1650-1865, that navies reflect diplomatic, economic and social developments. As such, Dull aims to provide an analysis of the establishment, growth, triumphs and failures of the United States Navy in relation to these developments.

2 Dull begins his study by outlining the hindrances the legacy of America's colonial past created for the establishment and growth of its Navy, a thesis that runs throughout the study. These hindrances, according to Dull, included America's weak industrial base, an "obsession with internal expansion that necessitated a substantial investment on the frontier rather than the sea" (2), as well as sectionalism which led to a preference for state as opposed to national government. In light of this thesis, Dull proceeds to discuss British political control over the North American colonies, which began in 1607, and which, according to Dull was marked by loose administration, "largely because Britain was preoccupied with European affair" (3) and was more interested in the sugar-
producing colonies of the Caribbean. The author then provides a brief illustration of sectional differences among the North American colonies themselves, which led to cooperation between colonies in military matters often being “half-hearted or ineffectual” (4). What they did share however, as Dull posits, was a desire for expansion into new lands, “such as the attempted intrusions by Virginia and Connecticut into parts of Pennsylvania” (4). Within just two paragraphs, Dull thus engages three of the hindrances to the U.S. Navy afforded by its colonial past. This succinct treatment of his material is due to Dull’s aim to cover such an expansive time frame in a single study. This approach does indeed allow for a “broad perspective,” but as a result does not necessarily enable a thorough engagement and analysis of the subject matter.

Dull indeed manages though to provide many historical details, including short European historical contextualisations in order to explore the consequences of these on the North American colonies and their naval warfare. For example, he mentions The Glorious Revolution of 1688, The Nine Years’ War (1689-1697) and the War of the Spanish Succession, where America’s role and participation, although minor, was indeed significant in providing indirect contributors to British naval strength and which “affected the American navy once the colonies asserted their independence” (7). Dull also touches upon the majority of naval engagements that involved American ships or waters including the Barbary Crisis of the 1790s. This particular analysis, albeit quite short, clearly establishes the significance of this crisis in the development of the United States Navy that directly led to the passing of the Naval Act of 1794.

Through various analyses, Dull illustrates the central thesis of America’s colonial past hindering its naval progress. American shipbuilding is one area in which the effects of colonial preoccupations can be seen. Describing American ships that were built or planned to be built, including the number of guns that were mounted on these vessels, Dull details the emergence and development of American shipbuilding in dockyards and shipyards, such as those found in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. These developments are clearly shown to have been effected and indeed hindered by the fact that the American colonies “were given few opportunities to build warships for the British navy” (8) before Independence. This meant that they lacked the experience in building “sturdy, heavily armed warships” (9) comparable to those of the British navy, when the need arose.

It is thus the case that Dull’s study successfully provides an overview concerning the establishment and development of the United States Navy, including its triumphs and losses, spanning from 1607 until 1865. American Naval History also engages with the ways in which its colonial past hindered its progress and how these hindrances were managed and overcome, leading to America’s future naval dominance. The accomplishment of these aims, though providing Dull’s “broad perspective,” goes hand-in-hand with a marked lack of in-depth analysis of the material. Significantly, America’s major wars are discussed only fleetingly in a limited number of chapters. As such, a reader wishing to probe deeper into particular aspects of American naval history would have to look elsewhere. Further attention to these important historical events would also enable a richer understanding of the legacy of America’s colonial origins.
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