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Book Review: Disciplining the Empire: Politics, Governance, and the Rise of the British Navy by Sarah Kinkel

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Kinkel, Sarah. *Disciplining the Empire: Politics, Governance, and the Rise of the British Navy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. 1+305 pages. Hardcover, \$39.51.

In 1899 the British government formally declared its intentions to ensure that the Royal Navy's strength was equal to the next two strongest naval powers.¹ This announcement would not have come as surprise to the majority of the British public of the time, nor would historians consider the move unusual. It seemed only natural that an island nation which depended on free trade, and the sea power that assured the continuation of that trade, would value its naval forces. Industrialization, with its attendant imperial processes, relied upon a strong navy to keep the flow of money and power running. Historian Sarah Kinkel's *Disciplining the Empire: Politics, Governance, and the Rise of the British Navy* seeks to complicate this straightforward narrative by examining "not how, but why Britain became the world's greatest naval power" (p. 1). She argues that British naval supremacy was not inevitable, it was subject to intense political debate throughout the eighteenth century, and was not universally beloved or prioritized by Parliament or the public. It was only through an intense professionalization process that the navy was able to emerge as a truly dominant force by the end of the century.

Disciplining the Empire is divided into five chapters with a conclusion and an epilogue. Her narrative is broadly chronological, beginning with the restoration of the monarchy and culminating with the end of the American Revolution. Each chapter highlights a particular political fight or professionalization program in the navy as the loosely defined and organized political parties of the time attempted to push forward their own ideologies. The heart of Kinkel's argument is chapter three, "Disorder, Discipline, and the Politics of Naval Reform," which describes the professionalization programs of the 1740s. Rather than accept the traditional periodization for the authoritarian shift in British politics and society, Kinkel moves it back forty

years to the 1740s. She sees this turn occurring simultaneously with the professionalization programs put in place by authoritarian Whigs, culminating with the 1749 Navy Bill. While many historians argue that these reforms were largely apolitical and uncontroversial, Kinkel places them at the heart of her argument regarding the very political nature of the navy to the Anglo-imperial world. Both MPs and the British public used the navy to conduct wider debates about power, society, and politics in both Britain and her empire.

Overall, Kinkel's work is full of insights and contributions to both naval and political scholarship of the eighteenth century. Her arguments for a re-periodization of the authoritarian shift in British politics to the 1740s is particularly strong and well written, as is her assertion that Britain's later naval supremacy was not inevitable—although she does underplay the geographic realities that might have pushed Britain towards building a strong navy as opposed to a continental army. Where *Disciplining the Empire* can fall short is in Kinkel's insistence on putting naval arguments at the center of political debates. She begins with naval debates in the aftermath of the Restoration, when anti-Catholic sentiment was running high, and many in Britain felt that the monarchy was stacking the navy with men who would be loyal to Charles and later James. This bled into debates about the proper size of the navy, but it is never clear whether these debates are about the navy itself, or if they were really about Catholics in the navy, and the presumption of despotic monarchial support from those Catholics.

Frequently, it seems that these nascent political parties used the navy to fight about a whole host of things, but that does not necessarily mean the navy itself lacked support. Kinkel provides a satisfying read, with a compelling narrative regarding the progression of the Royal Navy in the eighteenth century, as Britain dealt with multiple wars in Europe and the American

Revolution. For those hoping for an in-depth examination of India, the Caribbean, and Ireland they will have to keep waiting, as those topics are analyzed only in a short coda to chapter five. However, Kinkel lays out several avenues for further research, and provides some much needed course correction for aspects of eighteenth century naval and political historiography.

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Notes

¹ John Sumida, "Naval Armaments Races, 1889–1922," in *The Sea in History - The Modern World*, ed. Rodger N.A.M and Buchet Christian (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2017), 148.