

Angus Konstam. *British Gunboats of Victoria's Empire*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, www.bloomsbury.com, 2022. 48 pp., illustrations, index. US \$19.00, CDN \$26.00, paper; ISBN 978-1-47285-158-1.

Angus Konstam, a prolific author on naval subjects, particularly regarding the steam era, has written a most interesting short introduction on the subject of gunboats in the second half of Victoria's reign. Gunboat is a noun that is redolent of empire and the imposition of British power where and when needed in the unruly age of unfettered capitalism and imperialism. The varied British trading and economic interests scattered about the globe were often in need of the services of Royal Navy gunboats to protect their investments and businesses. As well, there was also frequent need for imperial expeditions of varying scales to impose British political control over any given area with a show of force against, for the most part, ill-equipped foes. If you have ever been curious as to what these gunboats looked like and how they were designed, Konstam's book will fill that need admirably.

Like all Osprey publications, the format provides for brief, high level accounts of the subject at hand, accompanied by a wide array of photographs, contemporary newspaper illustrations and fine, attractive, diagrams of the ships under review. The book is certainly brief, only 48 pages, but it crams a great deal of material into that space. The bulk is comprised of an extended account of the design of various gunboat classes over the period in question (1850s to the early 1900s). This period was one of significant technological ferment and gunboat construction standards evolved considerably from the wooden-hulled vessels designed to assist in subduing Russian fortifications during the Crimean War, to steel-hulled warships constructed at the end of the period. The basic concept of these craft, however, remained consistent; namely, sufficient size to mount a handful of guns (2-6 for the most part) of varying calibres. The Crimean War ended before the first gunboats were completed, but they were speedily deployed to various trouble spots to patrol, show the flag, deal with pirates and/or slavers, or subdue locals who threatened ports or trading facilities up rivers or on the coasts of Asia and Africa (for the most part).

Konstam is judicious in his analysis of the designs for these craft over the fifty-year period of their deployment around the globe. Many featured sub-optimal structures and layouts that rendered them ineffective in terms of seaworthiness, or in performing their constabulary duties. These were speedily despatched to ports to act as floating depot ships or tenders. The more successful ones elegantly fulfilled their roles and found themselves in a wide range of environments from the heat of the Red Sea, the Australasia Station, the littoral of the Caribbean Sea, China, Malaya and Africa (both east and west), as well up various river systems. Interestingly, Konstam notes that the commanders

of these minor warships tended to be lieutenants or junior commanders, who often were dealing with circumstances well beyond what their training and experience had provided for. The isolation and the need to use one's initiative without reference to senior naval or political officials made for a lonely and often risky existence. Not all decisions taken in this environment were wise or prudent. On other occasions the gunboats were attached to fleets and participated with credit in, for example, the 1882 Bombardment of Alexandria and the 1896 Bombardment of the Sultan's Palace at Zanzibar.

The gunboats that form the subject of this book were the epitome, however, of the numerous vessels condemned by Admiral Sir John Fisher as '...too weak to fight and too slow to run away...' and so were scrapped after 1904. Their function was taken up by light cruisers, which were altogether more capable warships. Yet gunboats performed an important function of maintaining the *Pax Britannica* in Britain's favour for approximately five decades. These gunboats were omnipresent around the world's trouble spots where they kept the peace, provided security, and thereby delivered the necessary tranquility to permit orderly (and profitable) commerce. It is a fascinating, albeit short, introduction to the topic and it provides a useful primer on a key tool for the *Pax Britannica*.

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Angus Konstam. *Big Guns in the Atlantic. Germany's Battleships and Cruisers Raid the Convoys, 1939-41*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, www.bloomsbury.com, 2021. 80 pp., illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. US \$22.00, paper; ISBN 978-1-4728-4596-2. (E-book available.)

In 1939 the British Navy was forced to fight what amounted to two distinct naval wars. The first one was waged against German U-boats and is familiarly known as the Battle of the Atlantic. This was a continuous struggle for control of the sea fought across the vast stretches of the Atlantic. It is the story of the convoys, the air gap, and of course the U-boat wolf packs. The other war was a struggle against the German surface fleet, designed to confine the fleet as much as possible in German ports, and to find and sink ships when they sortied. This surface conflict was often a cat and mouse game involving hours of patrolling punctuated by dramatic battles, such as the hunt for *Bismarck* or the Battle of the River Plate. Such encounters tend to produce very specific histories discussing the select actions of participating ships, but nothing systematic and cohesive.

In an effort to overcome this, Angus Konstam provides a compact study of