

Daniel MacCannell. *Coastal Defences of the British Empire in the Revolutionary & Napoleonic Eras*. Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen & Sword Military, www.pen-and-sword.co.uk, 2021. 240 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, index. UK £25.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-52675-345-8.

Considering Great Britain's naval supremacy over France throughout their wars in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, it can be easy to overlook the sense of vulnerability the British felt throughout the period. Even after the defeat of the Franco-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar in 1805, invasion remained a constant worry, one underscored by the Nore mutiny in 1797 and the Irish rebellion the following year. Nor was the threat of invasion confined to the British Isles, as the vast imperial holdings often seemed little more than ripe fruits waiting to be plucked by ambitious enemy captains or avaricious privateers. Never before had such a powerful empire seemed so vulnerable.

Given all of this, the value of a study of the coastal defences developed by the British at home and abroad to deal with these threats is obvious. What Daniel MacCannell provides instead, is a far broader survey of amphibious warfare and naval sieges involving the British in the early modern era, as well as description of the preparations made to deal with them. His scope is impressive and arguably justifiable, considering how much of Britain's planning and construction undertaken to address the French menace in the 1790s and 1800s was shaped by the experiences of the previous decades. To do this in a way that aids in understanding the book's ostensible subject, though, requires a focus that MacCannell never seems able to sustain.

The majority of the book offers a well-illustrated overview of the preparations made in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries against possible assaults along Britain's coastlines and her scattered empire. Woven into this are more detailed descriptions of the forts and other defences erected during the period, and the weapons and tactics they were designed to resist. MacCannell is a fluent and capable writer who demonstrates throughout his book an ability to explain sometimes obscure information (such as the amount of powder required to propel shots of various sizes) in a way that makes it not just comprehensible, but interesting as well. The problem is that these distinct details never fully cohere in a way that would allow the separate parts of the text to aid in understanding the overall subject.

Ultimately this flaw undermines MacCannell's entire book, as he never demonstrates an ability to marshal the facts that he offers to provide any sort of overarching analysis of his subject. Instead, the myriad details wash over the pages like flood water, spilling out uncontrollably in all directions. Digressions abound, most of which contribute little beyond a sense of the author's passion for his subject and his desire to demonstrate all that he has learned about it.

MacCannell describes deployments, summarizes battles, and recounts the lives of important military commanders without providing any encompassing understanding of how British planning for possible naval assaults or defensive constructions reveal general military practice during that era. This is all left for readers to sort out on their own, even if MacCannell does not provide sufficient information for them to do so.

There is no better example of this than in the author's coverage of the Martello towers that were the principal British coastal fortifications built during this period. His book is filled with references to them, as well as proposals for their construction, descriptions of their layouts and operations, the programs for building them, and full-colour photographs of surviving examples. Yet nowhere in his book does MacCannell explain, even briefly, the actual history of the Martello towers themselves or what it was that distinguished them from other types of coastal fortifications. Whether he regards such information as irrelevant or simply assumes his audience already knows about it is unclear, but the lack of such context leaves one wondering why that design in particular was chosen to serve a central role in British coastal defence preparations and why a beleaguered British state was willing to invest so much time and funding in their construction.

This issue also raises the question of who is the intended audience for this book. MacCannell makes no claims of having undertaken archival research for his work, which rests almost exclusively on previously published works by other authors. The sense that this is meant for a general audience is reinforced by MacCannell's frequent meanderings into loosely-related events in the Napoleonic Wars, which can be entertaining but serve little additional purpose. Yet any notion that his book is geared toward the lay reader is offset by his in-depth technical descriptions and his periodic assumption of his readers' familiarity with different aspects of his subject. The combination suggests a book that might serve well as a gift for someone's dad who has run out of Horatio Hornblower or Aubrey-Maturin novels to read and looks to delve further into the era they describe. For scholars of the period, however, this work has little to offer.

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John R. McKay. *Surviving the Arctic Convoys. The Wartime Memoirs of Leading Seaman Charlie Erswell.* Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen & Sword Maritime, www.pen-and-sword.co.uk. 2021. xvii+181 pp., illustrations, maps. UK £19.99, US \$39.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-39901-303-1. (E-book available.)