

## Book Reviews

**Emily Abdow. *The Boxer Rebellion: Bluejackets and Marines in China*. Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, [www.history.navy.mil](http://www.history.navy.mil), 2023. 134 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography. ISBN 978-1-943604-83-8. (E-book available for free at <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/publications-by-subject/boxer-rebellion.html>.)**

“Fish out of water” is how Abdow describes the US Navy and Marine Corps in her first monograph: *The Boxer Rebellion. Bluejackets and Marines in China 1900-1901*. The work aims to build insight into the day-to-day experiences of the sailors and marines in an international joint operations environment at the turn of the twentieth century. It also offers much more than that, however: insight into the triggers of conflict, as well as the varying approaches to international diplomacy and politics in China and more broadly. The concept of the “Eight Nation Alliance” is a clear example.

Abdow’s monograph offers an historical narrative and timeline of events during the lead-up to, conduct of, and aftermath of, conflict. Using a range of original historical documents and photographs specific to individual, command, and journalist experiences, Abdow has successfully referenced new sources as well as demonstrated a developing sense of authority on the topic.

As well as a summary of events leading to the 1900-1901 conflict colloquially known as *The Boxer Rebellion*, there is discussion on increasing foreign liaison with and involvement in traditional Chinese society. After the Opium Wars, this had included provision of prime land for residences of envoys in major cities; for example, over 10 foreign powers resided in the Legation Quarter in Beijing (then known as Peking). While the United States and European countries advocated for access and increased trade opportunities, the appetite for the division of China via various treaties and trading privileges was also competitive and ignorant of cultural practice. Christian missionaries traveled freely throughout China; however, they were said to ban Chinese *The Northern Mariner / Le marin du nord* 33, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2023), 465-596

Christian converts from traditional practices.

Abdow's work explores how this influence led to resentment which was channeled into the formation of a secret society, known as the "Boxers" for their practice of hand combat similar to boxing. "Cultural competence" is a more modern concept and one worth considering constructively alongside this monograph: how were the sailors and marines involved prepared to meet new cultures? Were the tropes of the "boxer" and situational reporting truly reflective of the tactical situation? Or were they designed to inform parallel political and social conflicts which suited other purposes and which still possibly form the foundation of foreign understanding of China? Some of this is explored.

For over seven weeks, increasing threats, violence and ultimately rebellion against the Legation Quarter had been defended by sailors and marines before more naval forces and reinforcements arrived at Dagu (Taku). "Friendly terms" were reported between members of the "Eight Nation Alliance" formed to suppress rebellion and reform order in Beijing and Tianjin.

However, individual danger, violence and death were also recorded. Many altercations between members of the alliance as well as locals casually ended with a revolver or bayonet. Misunderstanding caused disorder and confusion. Moreover, sentries and guards were quick to escalate violence, all the while intending to support the restoration of order. An Australian, Petty Officer 1st Class Underwood, wrote that he observed a "mortal feud" between the French and Americans.

The arrival of Alliance members in Dagu prompted further movements of the Boxers and retaliation. It was the battle of the Dagu Forts which ultimately triggered the Empress Dowager Cixi into declaring war, with the Qing Imperial Army joining the Boxers. The aim of the battle was for the "Eight Nation Alliance" to claim the Forts at the mouth of the Hai River which led to Tianjin (Tientsin), thereby securing the rail and river access to Beijing necessary to expeditiously deploy increased security and forward presence, as well as afford safe return of the diplomats.

Conclusions on achievements of the sailors and marines would be better qualified with opportunity to cross-reference original source materials. The Australian War Memorial, for example, holds several original private records alongside official ones, as like the Chinese and Greater Indian participation, the Australian contribution was counted under the British. [Link : <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/policing-duties>.] The cultural integration necessary would have, in fact, been much higher with such considerations.

Observations and conclusions of continued relevance include discussion that a "unified regional chain of command" (98) would have improved communications across the services and reduced any perceptions of favouritism

between units. Similarly, the importance of communications and relationships across Government and State Departments as well as that “of what authority US diplomats could exercise over marine legation guards” (99). Modern approaches to developing rules of engagement leave many questions as to what level of compliance with instruction may have been witnessed during this conflict.

Study of this conflict is valuable for a range of reasons. Abdow’s monograph is a good contribution to maritime studies; it would be an excellent contribution with the inclusion of perspectives from broader participants.

Amy Blacker  
Canberra, Australia

**Robert G. Allan and Peter A. Robson. *Workboats for the World—The Robert Allen Story*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, [www.harbourpublishing.com](http://www.harbourpublishing.com), 2022. xvii+571 pp., illustrations, index. CDN \$99.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-55017-987-3.**

An old saw in design is that form follows function. Conversely, it is equally true that form implies function. From this author’s admittedly biased point of view (having grown up on the British Columbia coast), this is particularly evident in the visual impression conveyed by a tug. The image of a tug is the very epitome of purposeful – whether smaller tugs berthing merchant ships, coastal tugs towing log booms and chip barges, or ocean-going salvage tugs steaming to the aid of disabled vessels, tugs exude an image of business-like, no-frills, and under-stated (but effective) strength. There are many varieties of tug, but they all share this aesthetic of purpose.

This is particularly evident in this marvelous new book presenting the history, evolution, and prodigious productivity of the Vancouver firm of Robert Allan Ltd (RAL), widely recognized as the world’s foremost designer of tugs. Over the last two decades, the name Robert Allan has become synonymous with tug design, but the path was not direct, nor even particularly pre-ordained. This book does an outstanding job of charting the evolution of RAL, and illustrating by turns, the role of talent, hard work, perseverance, opportunity, team-building (and even, occasionally, luck!) in forging an international success story.

There are many different and inter-twined stories in the almost 600 pages of this beautifully produced volume: the story of resolute and committed emigration from ‘The Old Country’; the story of dogged determination in establishing and sustaining an independent design house through trying times;