

**Kevin D. McCranie.** *Naval Strategic Thought*. Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute Press, [www.usni.org](http://www.usni.org), 2021. 344 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US \$44.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-68247-574-4.

Kevin McCranie, currently a professor of Comparative Strategy at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, has written a fine account of the two predominant naval strategists that, in effect, created the field that before them was largely unwritten, if not unconsidered. The two individuals, one American and one British, are Alfred Mahan and Julian Corbett. Both articulated an approach to naval strategy that had much in common, yet involved important differences that reflected the motivations of the two thinkers in undertaking the work that they did, as well as the differences in the place of the navies in each country at the time. The importance of the pair is that no one has risen to take their place in the forefront of maritime strategic affairs, signifying the originality of their work and its seminal nature. McCranie has provided real service in bringing the two thinkers together in a convenient package and has well assessed their work, noting their similarities and differences, as well as their ongoing importance.

Mahan started with the publication of his well known work *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783*, first published in 1890 and never out of print since. At the date of publication, Mahan's naval career was winding down and, it must be said, he was not overly successful in the business of going to sea and exercising command. He was, however, a fine lecturer at the newly opened US Naval War College, a post he earned as a result of this book. From there he set about writing prolifically on naval affairs, some historical, such as his first, and others more polemical in seeking to push US naval policy in a more aggressive direction. Indeed, at the time of writing the US Navy was relatively small and not much regarded in terms of national or international affairs. This Mahan sought to change and push the US in developing naval power reflective of its economic might and increasingly global interests. Mahan was a naval propagandist, with an agenda.

Corbett had an entirely different background. He was well educated, with private fortune, and thereby able to indulge his interests in history without the support of an academic institution or formal position in any entity that might underwrite his work. He started life as a barrister, but was not an enthusiastic practitioner in that field. He joined the Naval Records Society in the early 1890s, that led to his preparing a volume on the Spanish War of 1585-87. He then wrote a book on the Tudor navy based on archival research that matched anything done in academia at the time. This book, *Drake and the Tudor Navy*, was published in 1898, with a follow-on effort, *The Successors of Drake*, in

1900. Like Mahan, this background led to his appointment as a lecturer at the Royal Navy War Course in 1902, that was being set up at the time to mirror the US Naval War College. This appointment was of the nature of piece work with pay based on providing lectures as needed rather than a salary, which suited Corbett's preferences. He was able to continue his research into British maritime history, writing a series of accounts up to the time of the Napoleonic Wars, as well as articles on contemporary military and naval controversies. Many of his books, notably *England and the Seven Years War*, became classics. He was employed sporadically by the Admiralty throughout the first decade of the twentieth century and assisted in the development of war plans and analyses based on his historical knowledge. His key work was his summary on naval policy, *Principles of Maritime Strategy*, published in 1911. Eventually his position was regularised, and he ended up appointed to the Cabinet Historical Office and wrote the first three volumes of the *Official History of the Great War at Sea: Naval Operations*, Vol I, II and III, dying before he finished the task.

McCranie has divided his account into three parts – not so identified, but easily discerned. The first two chapters cover the intellectual development of both Mahan and Corbett's theories, as well as their motivations and influences. The second section is comprised of some nine chapters that explore separate ideas that were explored by both, underlining their differences and similarities. The final section of two chapters sums up the 'way of war' as articulated by both, which is followed by a brief concluding chapter. This organisation makes it straightforward for anyone seeking clarity as to the thinking of both strategists on specific areas, as well as the helpful introductory and summary chapters for an overview of the genesis of their works and their significance.

It is evident that the quite different motivations for the two affected how they went about their analysis. Mahan was very much a polemicist with the objective of promoting the idea of the US developing a navy commensurate with its economic power, and thereby assuming its rightful place in the world. He developed a model and then selectively used historical examples to back it up. He was also motivated financially as a writer who, after the enormous success of *The Influence of Sea Power*, was much sought after as commentator on naval affairs from the 1890s up to his death in 1914. He also continued to write financially successful, but uneven, historical accounts for the period after his initial volume.

Corbett's approach was quite different in that he developed his theories from deep historical research rather than the other way round. His audience was intended to be mid-ranking and senior officers in the Royal Navy that he reached via the War Course lectures as well as through articles in journals. Corbett's views were controversial in comparison with Mahan's. His

conclusions as to the proper application of sea power were in some respects uncongenial to his RN audience. He eschewed the blind adherence to any 'received truth', notably the primacy of the offensive and noted that aggressive defensive operations were often the appropriate route to success. The RN senior leadership, prior to the Great War, had entirely bought into offensive action at all costs with many a stumble throughout the war as a result (shared, it must be said, by the leadership of most armies at the time with equally unhappy outcomes). Mahan's model of the decisive battle, somewhat misread, was far more congenial to the prejudices of the RN and hence, he had a highly positive reception in Great Britain as well as, notably, Germany. Corbett was also much in favour of Britain's traditional way of war via periphery operations in support of Continental allies. Britain's creation of a continental-scaled army was viewed with dismay by Corbett as the Great War unfolded. Corbett's far more subtle analysis did not always appeal to his audience and was often not understood. In defence of his students, it is conceded that strategic analysis is a difficult topic to grasp, the more so by individuals whose entire career had been focused on ship management and command, and deference to the wisdom of superiors.

It must be said that neither Mahan nor Corbett produced any concise definitive articulation of their strategic doctrine. Both referred to military theorists, such as von Clausewitz and Baron Jomini, for certain aspects of their thinking as to the maritime dimension of national grand strategy. Both relied on historical analysis for support in their accounts. Both can be accused of occasional dense and difficult expositions of aspects of their thought, which complicated the transmission of their ideas. Both agreed as to the primacy of political objectives in driving maritime strategy (Clausewitz's doctrine on this point was emphasized by both). Both noted the complexities inherent in any given context, making pat answers to strategic challenges impossible. Both were perceived as in the front rank of naval thinkers in their own day to the present. Interestingly, notwithstanding the more than a century that has passed since their various works were published, they have not been superseded by a new consensus as to maritime strategy by a more recent thinker any more than Clausewitz and Jomini have been in the military sphere.

McCranie has produced a useful account on Mahan and Corbett's thinking. His summary as to the genesis of their works and what they articulated as a 'way of war' is very well done. The chapters that explore specific topics are excellent and will assist any researcher interested in aspects of their maritime strategies. I have no hesitation in recommending this important book.

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