James P. Levy. ***The Crisis of British Sea Power: The Collapse of a Naval Hegemon 1942.*** **New York, NY: Routledge, www.routledge.com, 2024. 158 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. US $144.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-03243-777-4. (E-book available.)**

Less than a hundred years ago Great Britain was enjoying a centuries-long reign as the world's greatest naval power. Having recently seen off the most formidable threat to its hegemony since the Napoleonic Wars, its fleet was the world's largest, unsurpassed in the number of capital ships and with more aircraft carriers and cruisers than any other navy. So daunting were the prospects of matching it that the other major naval powers used diplomacy to regulate competition rather than getting into a potentially ruinous naval arms race with the cost of these agreements being the locking in of Britain's naval dominance. Simply put, nobody wanted to mess with the Royal Navy.

Today, however, the British navy no longer enjoys hegemonic status. For decades historians have examined this transformation from a variety of perspectives to explore how Britain lost its naval supremacy. In the latest contribution to this debate, James Levy searches for answers by identifying 1942 as the moment when he believes this hegemony vanished, and using the circumstances to understand why Britain was forced to give it up. It is a provocative, even feisty book that finds within the depths of the Second World War the point at which the British paid the price for a series of poor decisions, ones which forced them to cede their status to the United States.

Many of these decisions predated the war and reflected the larger economic and geopolitical challenges Britain faced during the interwar era. Although still a formidable economic power capable of drawing upon the resources of its empire, Britain was still coping with the enormous financial strain resulting from the First World War. This made participation in the interwar treaty system restricting naval arms attractive, as British finances were in no condition to support the sort of naval building needed to maintain British dominance against the superior resources of the United States. This changed in the mid-1930s, as the combination of the reemergent German challenge and Japanese expansionism in East Asia led to the passage in 1937 of a new naval expansion program, one intended to provide parity with the combination of these powers. Yet the new program was more modest than the one desired by the Admiralty and was far from complete when the war began.

Even without the completed program, in September 1939 the Royal Navy possessed a fleet second to none in the world. And for the first year and a half of the war, it was more than up to the task of maintaining Britain's naval hegemony. Yet from the start of the war the Royal Navy suffered losses, most dramatically with the sinkings of the *Royal Oak* and the *Courageous* in the first

weeks of the conflict, but more regularly with cruisers and destroyers being damaged or destroyed in operations against Germany. Italy's entry in the war only added to the demands placed on the fleet. Levy pushes back vigorously against the traditional view of the Italians as cowardly and incompetent, noting their bravery in battle and stressing that their cautious deployments were the result of restrictions imposed by their high command rather than any reluctance by the sailors at sea to engage their enemy. By contrast the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, prioritized aggressiveness and criticized commanders who exercised too much caution. This may have been in keeping with the traditions of the Royal Navy, but it also contributed to a steady toll of losses that the British could ill afford to sustain.

These issues cohered into a crisis in December 1941 with Japan's attack on Britian's position in Southeast Asia. With the war in Europe still raging and many of its capital ships under repair or refitting, Britain could spare few assets to defend their possessions in the region. Those ships they did send – most notably the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* – were no match for Japanese air and naval power and were quickly sunk or withdrawn. When coupled with the crippling of the battleships *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth* that same month by Italian demolition teams, Britain's naval assets were stretched to their limit. Increasingly the Royal Navy could only support operations or reinforce their forces by stripping vessels from other theatres, which constrained their activities. The lowest point came in the spring of 1942, with the remainder of the Royal Navy's Eastern Fleet withdrawn westward to spare them from Japanese attack, the abandonment of convoy PQ-17 after an abortive sortie by German naval units in Norway, and the Malta convoys suffering fearsome losses to provide just a trickle of supplies to the embattled island. Although Britain's naval situation improved over the rest of 1942, much of the success it enjoyed was as a partner of the United States Navy, rather than as a hegemon in its own right.

Levy recounts this crisis through the many battles waged by the Royal Navy over the course of 1942. Not only does this make for entertaining reading, but it also conveys effectively how the inexorable pace of operations ground down Britain's naval hegemony. As Levy notes, though, this just laid bare the cumulative effects on British naval power of limited resources, advancing technologies, and outdated tactics. Although these long-term factors were more significant, they receive proportionally less attention in the text than do the battles. Examining these factors in more detail would have increased the book's value considerably, as would have a greater use of archival records as published works comprise most of the author's sources. Even without these things, however, Levy has provided readers with a thought-provoking study that makes a useful contribution to the debate over the shift in global naval

hegemony during the twentieth century.

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Eileen Reid Marcil. *The PS* Royal William *of Quebec: The First True Transatlantic Steamer.* Montreal: Baraka Books, www.barakabooks.com, 2020. 132pp. illustrations, bibliography, appendices, glossary index, notes. CDN $29.95, paper, $24.99, pdf. ISBN 978-1-77186-229-5 paper, 978-1-77186-252-3 pdf.

Eileen Marcil literally wrote the book on shipbuilding in Quebec with *The Charley-Man: A History of Wooden Shipbuilding in Quebec* (1995), *Tall Ships and Tankers: A History of the Davie Shipbuilders* (1997), and her 2019 *Northern Mariner/le marin du nord* article on Quebec builder John Goudie. As such, she is ideally suited to write the story of the *Royal William*, a paddle steamer designed and launched in Quebec in 1831 that became the first vessel to cross the Atlantic entirely under steam power. While other accounts of the ship have focussed almost entirely on that event, Marcil fortunately has provided a more rounded picture of the vessel and its times. The thin volume (fewer that 100 pages without the appendices) tells three linked stories: an introduction to steamship services in Canada before 1830, the history of the *Royal William* itself, and the struggle for recognition of the ship as the first to cross the Atlantic under steam power.

Even without being recognized for the first Atlantic steam passage, the *Royal William* was an important vessel in Canadian history. Steamship transportation on the St. Lawrence River and in the Gulf began in 1809 and was common by the early 1820s, when seven steamboats served the route between Montreal and Quebec. But the link between Canada and what were called the 'lower provinces' still required a sailing ship, and travel between Quebec and Halifax usually took three or more weeks. Recognizing the benefits of closer ties between the colonies and with subsidies approved by both the Quebec and Nova Scotia legislatures, a company was formed to build a steamship and provide the first regular service between the two ports. The majority of the shares were held in Montreal and Quebec, but there were also subscribers from Miramichi, New Brunswick, and Halifax, among whom were several members of the Cunard family.

Given her research history, it is not surprising that Marcil's coverage is particularly good with regard to the actual building of the vessel, which early in 1831 inaugurated service between Quebec and Halifax, touching at Miramichi, Pictou, and Charlottetown. Despite the apparent enthusiasm, the inter-colonial