

CAPTAIN MAHAN has written distinctively the best and most important, and also by far the most interesting, book on naval history¹ which has been produced on either side of the water for many a long year. Himself an officer who has seen active service and borne himself with honor under fire, he starts with an advantage that no civilian can possess. On the other hand, he does not show the shortcomings which make the average military man an exasperatingly incompetent military historian. His work is in every respect scholarly, and has not a trace of the pedantry which invariably mars mere self-conscious striving after scholarship. He is thoroughly conversant with his subject, and has prepared himself for it by exhaustive study and research, and he approaches it, to use an old-fashioned phrase, an entirely philosophical spirit. He subordinates detail to mass-effects, trying always to grasp and make evident the essential features of a situation; and he neither loses sight of nor exaggerates the bearing which the history of past struggles has upon our present problems.

One of his merits is the use of French authorities. For the last three centuries England has been the central and commanding figure in naval history, and, naturally, her writers, followed by our own, have acted blandly on the belief that they themselves wrote the only books on the subject worth reading. As a matter of fact, the French historians and essayists form a school of marked excellence in many ways. It would, for instance, be difficult to match in English such writings as those of Admiral Jurien de la Gravière. Only by a study of the French authors is it

¹ *The Influence of Sea Power upon History.* By Captain A. T. MAHAN, U. S. N. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1890.

possible to arrive at the true facts in the history of the gigantic sea struggle, lasting for over a century, which began at Bantry Bay and Beachy Head and ended at Trafalgar.

In his Introduction, Captain Mahan shows very clearly the practical importance of the study of naval history in the past to those who wish to estimate and use aright the navies of the present. He dwells on the fact that not only are the great principles of strategy much the same as they ever were, but that also many of the underlying principles of the tactics of the past are applicable to the tactics of the present; or, at least, that the tacticians of to-day can with advantage study the battles of the past. He does not fall into the mistake of trying to make forced analogies, but he does prove, for one thing, that the school which professes the *mêlée* or "never-mind-manceuvring" principles, no less than the other school, which tends to turn manœuvring into an end instead of a means, and to develop mere timid tactical trifling, may study the fleet actions and naval campaigns of the last two centuries to good purpose. There are plenty of naval authorities who believe that an encounter between squadrons of modern ironclads, with their accompanying rams and torpedo-boats, can be nothing but a huge bloody scramble, in which each ship fights for its own hand. This belief may be true as an estimate of probabilities; but if it be, it will only show that as yet the nineteenth century does not know how to wield with proper skill the wonderful weapons it has forged. Similarly, the early sea fights between fleets of sailing-ships were mere *mêlées*; men knowing nothing more of tactics than that one-sided view of the "shock" principle which consists in running headlong at an adversary, — a sys-

tem whereof the success depends entirely upon the nature of the adversary. But as time went on a change took place, and there arose great admirals, who differed as much from the rough fleet-leaders who preceded them as Alexander differed from Alaric. Sea war grew into an art, and the fleet that conquered had to pay heed to such considerations as unity of action and intelligent direction of force quite as much as to the valor of the seaman and the fighting capacity of the individual ships.

Captain Mahan's effort is to show the tremendous effect which sea power has had upon the development of certain of the great nations of the world, especially at momentous crises of their history. In his introductory chapter he gives one striking illustration, for he shows that it was the sea power of Rome, during the second Punic war, which was one of the chief determining factors in bringing about the failure of Hannibal's campaign in Italy, and the consequent overthrow of Carthage. He makes this point so clear that it is difficult to see how it can be controverted successfully. The second Punic war was one of the all-important world struggles, and has been described again and again by every kind of writer for the past twenty centuries, yet Captain Mahan is the first who has given proper prominence to one of the main causes by which the result was determined. This is a fair example of Captain Mahan's acute historic insight, and it is characteristic of the way his book is written. Hitherto, historians of naval matters, at least so far as English and American writers are concerned, have completely ignored the general strategic bearing of the struggles which they chronicle; they have been for the most part mere annalists, who limited themselves to describing the actual battles and the forces on each side. On the other hand, the general historian sees but dimly how much and in what way the net outcome of a conflict has

been influenced by the might of the contestants on the sea, and in consequence pays but vague and unsubstantial heed to the really vital cause by which the result was accomplished. Captain Mahan, however, never loses sight of the deep, underlying causes and of the connection between events. His discussion of the campaigns and battles, of the strategy and tactics, is full and clear, and written in a perfectly scientific and dispassionate spirit. But this is not his greatest merit. He never for a moment loses sight of the relations which the struggles by sea bore to the history of the time; and, for the period which he covers, he shows, as no other writer has done, the exact points and the wonderful extent of the influence of the sea power of the various contending nations upon their ultimate triumph or failure, and upon the futures of the mighty races to which they belonged.

In the first chapter after the Introduction, he discusses the various elements which go to make up sea power, writing always, as elsewhere throughout the book, with especial heed to the circumstances of the United States at the present time. He shows how sea power is affected by the geographical position, physical conformation, extent, and density of population of a country no less than by the character of the people and of the government. He points out the need of adequate fortifications and navy yards on all the coast, and incidentally specifies the need at some point on the Gulf coast, preferably the mouth of the Mississippi; and he lays stress on the necessity of a large commercial marine, if we wish the sea population which alone furnishes a secure base for naval power. He draws one or two instructive lessons from the sudden rise and no less sudden fall of the French sea power during the reign of Louis XIV., and shows how that monarch undid the work of his great minister Colbert. One of the most interesting points he makes is when he

deals with the inherent wrongheadedness of the French policy of hostility to Holland. As he shows, Holland's greatness lay on the sea, and her real rival, the rival before whom she ultimately succumbed, was England. France, also, strove for development by sea only to be steadily thwarted and finally worsted by the island kingdom; while on land Holland had no territory which France was able to gain. It was, therefore, clearly the true wisdom of both nations to make common cause against the people who, in the end, triumphed over both. A policy of steady alliance between France and Holland, from the days of De Ruyter, Tromp, Duquesne, and Tourville onward, might have changed the fate of the world; and, if so, would probably have changed it much for the worse. The spread of the mighty English-speaking race, their rise to world-dominion, was greatly helped by the jealous division between its two most formidable foes during the critical years when the possession of the North American continent hinged largely on the control of the Atlantic Ocean.

Captain Mahan's second and third chapters treat of the wars waged by Holland against England and France, separately or united. Undoubtedly the greatest figure in these wars was the Dutch Admiral De Ruyter; and the series of long and exhausting struggles between Holland and England are especially noteworthy because they afford the only instance where any naval power has striven for the mastery with England, on equal terms, through a succession of wars wherein victory and defeat alternated in campaign after campaign and battle after battle. On the whole, the superiority remained with the English, and the net result left them ahead. But no other nation ever gave England such a tussle for the dominion of the seas; and no admiral, not even Nelson, accomplished more for his country than De Ruyter did in the battles ter-

minating with the battle of the Texel, wherein, with much inferior forces, he held at bay the combined French and English fleet, and thus saved Holland from an invasion which meant destruction. The old hero himself perished, a couple of years later, in the Mediterranean, at the battle of Stromboli. He was then in command of a mixed squadron, part Dutch and part Spanish, and was opposed by a superior French fleet under the able Huguenot Duquesne, who stood in France much as, a century before, Lord Howard stood in England. The first fight between these two redoubtable antagonists was a draw; in the second the Spanish ships fled, and De Ruyter was overcome and slain. The Spanish fleets, from the time of Drake to that of Nelson, won hardly a single victory; and even when they formed part of a coalition, their presence in a given battle rarely did more than swell the adversary's triumph.

In all these seventeenth-century fights fire-ships played an important part, and our author draws one or two curious and interesting comparisons between them and their modern analogues, the torpedo-boats. He then describes the war in which, at the end of the seventeenth century, the French were first pitted against the combined forces of the English and Dutch. The English at that date had no admiral who can be considered the equal of the Frenchman Tourville, though Tourville himself cannot rank with such men as Suffren, Tegethof, or Farragut, not to speak of Nelson. For the first three years of the war Tourville cruised with his fleet off the shores of England and Ireland, and kept the upper hand of his opponents, defeating them twice. In one of these battles, at Beachy Head, he destroyed a dozen Dutch and English ships, but, through over-caution, failed to strike a decisive blow at the enemy, though much his superior in strength. Two years later he was beaten by an over-

whelming force at the obstinate battle of the Hague. Disheartened by this defeat, the French gave up trying to contend for the supremacy, and turned their attention to privateering, or commerce-destroying, on a colossal scale. They inflicted thereby much damage on the English, but the damage was not of a kind that materially affected the issue of the war.

The next four chapters deal with the maritime history of Europe up to the outbreak of the American Revolution; that is, with the first three quarters of the eighteenth century. At the very beginning of this period, in the war of the Spanish succession, England established her overwhelming preponderance at sea, which has lasted, with but one or two partial interruptions, to our own time. Until this period she had shown no such preponderance. During the seventeenth century, though on the whole she established her superiority, she did so only by a long series of desperate and doubtful struggles with the Dutch and French; and she was defeated again and again by both these rivals. She produced one or two noted admirals, like Blake and Monk, but none who stood above the sea chiefs of her adversaries.

All this was changed after the year 1700. From the time when Gibraltar was taken to the beginning of the war for American independence, England possessed the undisputed supremacy of the ocean. It was this, more than anything else, which gave her North America and India, and paved the way for her taking possession of Australia and South Africa. But the very extent of her superiority prevented any serious efforts to overcome it, and the campaigns and battles of this period possess but little interest in themselves.

When, however, England, in the midst of her struggle with the revolted colonies, was struck by the combined navies of France and Spain, both of

them, but especially that of France, having been sedulously cared for and built up in the interval, the fight became most interesting, for it was waged on equal terms. Captain Mahan's account of this war is excellent. Among other things, he shows clearly the harm wrought to France by the system of tactical timidity in naval warfare which her rulers adopted and instilled into the minds of their sea commanders. The English always tried to destroy their opponent's navies, and it was their cue to attack, which they always did with great courage, though often with so little skill as to neutralize their efforts. The French, on the other hand, had been cowed by repeated defeat, and, except when led by some born fighter, like the Bailli de Suffren, rarely took the offensive or pressed home a blow, though they fought with great skill when attacked; and their strategy was fatally defective, in that they conducted their campaigns, not with the purpose of destroying the enemy's fighting power, his war fleets, but with the purpose of neutralizing or evading it, while some island or outpost was secured or conquered. It must be said, nevertheless, that our author does not give sufficient weight to the military operations on land, and to the effect produced by the American privateers.

This war of the American Revolution brought to the front two great admirals, Rodney and Suffren; and two of the best chapters in Captain Mahan's book are those in which he describes the deeds of these men. The military analysis in these two chapters is really very fine; no previous writer has approached it, in dealing with either the Frenchman or the Englishman. In particular, Suffren's campaign in the Indian Ocean has never before been treated with such clearness of perception and appreciation. Indeed, to most English writers he has hitherto been little but a name; and it was hardly possible for a French-

man to write of him as justly as Captain Mahan has done.

One or two of the points which Captain Mahan brings out have a very important bearing on our present condition, especially in view of the increased interest which is felt in the navy and coast defense. There is a popular idea that we could accomplish wonders by privateering, — or rather by commerce-destroying, as Captain Mahan calls it. He shows very clearly, on the other hand, that commerce-destroying can never be more than a secondary factor — even though of very considerable importance — in bringing to a conclusion a war with a powerful foe. He shows also that, for the most successful kind of commerce-destroying, there must be a secure base of operations near the line of the enemy's commerce, and some kind of line of battle to fall back on, — and the United States possesses neither. Doubtless, in event of a war, we might cause annoyance and loss to an enemy's commerce; but we could not by this method accomplish anything like as much as the people at large, and not a few of our naval officers also, believe. It is beyond all comparison more important to cripple the enemy's fighting-ships than to harass his merchantmen.

Again, as Captain Mahan shows, our experience in the Civil War is worthless as a test of what we could do against a foreign sea power. It is impossible to imagine a more foolish state of mind than that which accepts the belief in our capacity to improvise means of resistance against the sea power of Europe, ready equipped and armed at all points, because we were successful in overcoming with our makeshifts an enemy even more unprepared than we were ourselves. It is true that at the end of four years' warfare we had de-

veloped a formidable fleet; but in the event of a European contest, it is not likely that we should be allowed as many weeks before the fatal blow fell. There is a loose popular idea that we could defend ourselves by some kind of patent method, invented on the spur of the moment. This is sheer folly. There is no doubt that American ingenuity could do something, but not enough to prevent the enemy from ruining our coasting-trade and threatening with destruction half our coast towns. Proper forts, with heavy guns, could do much; but our greatest need is the need of a fighting-fleet. Forts alone could not prevent the occupation of any town or territory outside the range of their guns, or the general wasting of the seaboard; while a squadron of heavy battle-ships, able to sail out and attack the enemy's vessels as they approached, and possessing the great advantage of being near their own base of supplies, would effectually guard a thousand miles of coast. Passive defense, giving the assailant complete choice of the time and place for attack, is always a most dangerous expedient. Our ships should be the best of their kind, — this is the first desideratum; but, in addition, there should be plenty of them. We need a large navy, composed not merely of cruisers, but containing also a full proportion of powerful battle-ships, able to meet those of any other nation. It is not economy — it is niggardly and foolish short-sightedness — to cramp our naval expenditures, while squandering money right and left on everything else, from pensions to public buildings.

In conclusion, it must be said that Captain Mahan's style is clear, simple, and terse. His book is as interesting as it is valuable; and in writing it he has done a real service.

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