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The French Navy and the Seven Years War

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First things first: this book is not really “about” the French Navy; in fact, it’s a full-dress history of the Seven Years War as a whole, from the French perspective. The title is not a complete misnomer, however, inasmuch as the Navy is accorded far more attention than in most accounts of the period, but readers hoping to find much detail about individual ships, captains, or battles will be disappointed. The focus is almost entirely upon grand strategy, diplomacy, and economics and finance; as such it is a first-rate work of serious history.

The author, a senior associate editor of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* and author of the award-winning history *The French Navy and American Independence*, is an able guide to what he aptly describes as the first “world war.” More commonly referred to here as the French and Indian War, the Seven Years War was fought not only in North America and the West Indies, but also in Europe and as far east as India; its antagonists included all the major European powers, with France leading one ever-shifting coalition, and Britain leading the other.

At stake were both the European balance of power and wide-ranging colonial interests, especially in North America. In this latter regard, the respective navies were vitally important; this was particularly true of France, whose Canadian possessions were far less populous and self-sufficient than Britain’s. Whereas the British could raise and supply substantial colonial forces to supplement their regular army in America, the French relied mainly on forces sent and supplied from France, hence the indispensability of their navy.

Throughout the war there were naval engagements that affected the land campaigns but no decisive fleet battles; in the end, the French lost Canada but retained fishing rights to the North American fishery, not only an important source of food, but (more important from the Navy’s standpoint) a key training ground for sailors who could be impressed into fighting ships during wartime.

Year by year, the author covers the war’s naval aspects in considerable though rather dry detail, as well as the land battles that actually determined its outcome; he is also very thorough about the Byzantine diplomacy carried on by Louis XV, George III, Frederick the Great, Maria Theresa of Austria, Elizabeth of Russia, and their various ministers and allies. He explains the economics of empire clearly, as well as the complicated business of financing eighteenth-century wars. Any serious student of the era will find this a comprehensive history, complete with twelve appendices on the French Navy, ninety-five pages of notes, and a forty-page bibliography.

As such, it is highly recommended, though most casual readers would do better to seek out a less high-powered, more narrative account.

PEYTON MOSS (August 18, 2009)

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