

## REVIEW ESSAY

---

### NEPTUNE TRIUMPHUS

*Richard Norton*

Willmott, H. P. *The Last Century of Sea Power*. Vol. 1, *From Port Arthur to Chanak, 1892–1922*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2009. 543pp. \$34.95

Willmott, H. P. *The Last Century of Sea Power*. Vol. 2, *From Washington to Tokyo, 1922–1945*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2010. 679pp. \$39.95

Author H. P. Willmott does not lack for self-confidence. This is evident from the first pages of the provocatively titled *The Last Century of Sea Power*. In a self-described effort to “explain, rather than describe,” Willmott seeks to shed light on all aspects of maritime power that have played a role in world affairs during the last hundred years. This project is of such scope that lesser historians might well spend their lives in research and never complete a manuscript. Other significant challenges inherent in this task include the need to paint with a fairly broad brush, without sacrificing critical detail—how to choose which elements to emphasize and how to deal with the personalities that populate the hundred-year landscape. While the degree to which Willmott has succeeded in this endeavor may be debated, the resulting work is important enough to find a place on the bookshelf of any serious student of maritime history.

Not surprisingly, Willmott’s volumes are structured along primarily chronological lines. Volume 1 begins with the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 and eventually arrives at the now all-but-forgotten Chanak crisis of 1922. These are reasonable points of departure and arrival. The Sino-Japanese War saw, among other things, one of the first meetings of modern battleships in combat and the emergence of Japan

*Richard J. Norton is a professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College. While in the U.S. Navy, he served at sea, as well as on Capitol Hill as a Senate liaison officer with the Navy’s Office of Legislative Affairs. He retired from the Navy in 1996 with the rank of commander. He holds a PhD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in international relations. Dr. Norton has edited three national security volumes published by the Naval War College.*

as a naval power to be reckoned with. Chanak, as Willmott argues, can be seen as the end of strictly line-of-sight naval battles, as well as the point where fleets began to be replaced by task groups and task forces. The second volume tells of the great naval treaties of the 1920s and concludes at the 1945 surrender ceremonies in Tokyo Bay, with a U.S. Navy unparalleled in power, size, and ability to dominate the world's oceanic commons.

In the main, this approach works reasonably well. For the most part, Willmott refuses to allow his primary narrative to become bogged down in the weeds of description and successfully explains the major maritime muscle movements of the last century. However, readers who want their history packed with emotion, heroism, cowardice, and the feelings and acts of individuals are apt to be disappointed. This is not the place to thrill to the sacrifice of Navy commander Ernest Evans or the triumph of German U-boat ace Gunther Prien, much less to the tragic farce of U.S. Naval Academy graduate Philo McGiffin. A reader with a broader panoramic spectrum in mind will not feel the loss, for Willmott provides plenty of information to think about. Like the best histories of any genre, these books stay with you.

Both volumes are well written and can easily stand alone as significant and independent historical works. Of the two volumes, the first is marginally more useful, primarily because it illuminates developments and actions that have gone largely underreported. Willmott's work on the Dardanelles campaign is especially good, and his carefully built and well supported conclusion that the Allies were never in a position to gain control of the strait or knock Turkey out of the war is seemingly impossible to refute.

This is not to imply, however, that the second volume is weak. Its section on naval disarmament treaties is masterful. Willmott also does a fine job in covering such precursor events to the Second World War as the Ethiopian conflict and Spanish Civil War, and he offers a superb explanation of the complexities of the U-boat war in the Atlantic. His discussion of the weakness of Japan's strategic planning in the Pacific and its naval deficiencies in general is also convincing, though his relative lack of regard for Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto may surprise many readers.

Many elements in these two books deserve to be singled out for praise. One of the strongest suits of Willmott's work is his refusal to view naval or military power as the sole component of sea power. For example, the rise, fall, and crucial contributions of merchant fleets to national survival and military success are not ignored. This is especially useful with respect to the critical importance of Allied merchant shipping to Great Britain's ability to endure German U-boat campaigns and eventually emerge on the winning side of two world wars. Another area on which Willmott sheds light is the role of industrial capacity. While

the importance of U.S. industrial might to the eventual victory of the United States in the Pacific is hardly a new discovery, Willmott's argument that the Japanese navy, built primarily to defeat its U.S. counterpart, succeeded in doing so but in a way that meant its own destruction by late 1943 is convincing. So too is his associated observation that in the meantime the United States had built a much bigger and better fleet that would bring defeat to the shores of Tokyo Bay. Willmott's arguments are so strong as to imply that U.S. victory was inevitable and did not require exceptional strategists, tacticians, or leaders—a conclusion some will find uncomfortable.

An additional significant strength of this work is extensive documentation. Willmott provides a staggering array of charts, as well as detailed accounts of armaments, ship sinkings, and building programs. Each chapter contains pages of supporting data arranged in multiple appendixes. At the same time, Willmott does not belong to the "cult of statistics." The documentation merely supports his explanations and conclusions, and he clearly indicates when data are contradictory or not available.

Another positive element in this Herculean labor is the inclusion of what could be called the contribution of "lesser naval powers" to the historical tapestry. He does not overlook the ancillary events and the "lesser theaters" of conflict. Willmott examines everything from the roles of the Russian and Turkish navies in the Black Sea during the First World War to those of the Greek and Yugoslav navies in World War II. This is both important and refreshing, offering a greater understanding of the historical record.

Willmott does not back away from controversy but rather embraces and even creates it. Readers will discover there are times, almost always unexpected, when the author surprises, delights, and quite possibly enrages with his observations and opinions. On occasion he is surprisingly empathetic and almost lyrical. For example, Willmott is understandably sympathetic to the plight of Admiral Pascual Cervera, who commanded Spanish ships in Cuba in 1898, and his description of World War II Free French and Vichy conflicts borders on the poetic. Indeed, Willmott is at his most human when he anguishes over the sinking of the Vichy sloop *Bougainville* by its Free French counterpart *Savorgnan de Brazza*. He is equally empathetic when discussing Admiral of the Fleet John Rushworth Jellicoe's decision making during the battle of Jutland.

Willmott can also deliver an example with great effect. This can be seen when he puts the relative contributions of the Soviet Union and the United States into perspective by noting that in World War II the number of killed Soviet second-lieutenant equivalents exceeded the total combat losses of the United States. The more one thinks about this fact, the more the actual contribution of the Western Allies to the land victory in Europe seems to take on a different dimension.

However, these displays of empathy are rare. Willmott is much more likely to deliver his opinion as in a drive-by shooting. For example, he claims that the British systematically and deliberately exaggerated their role in victory over Germany during WWII for years. He also argues that the U-boat war was not won until 1945, not the more commonly claimed date of 1943. He even has the audacity to suggest that British naval gunnery and damage control left much to be desired, especially compared to those of U.S. ships—the naval battles of Guadalcanal notwithstanding. He also attacks the assertion that Admiral “Jackie” Fisher was the father of the famous *Dreadnought* class of battleship. His pen drips with disdain when he describes Winston Churchill as “fraudulently dishonest” in defending the Dardanelles campaign and “inept” in “terms of the direction of the overall operation.” One cannot imagine this has endeared Willmott to much of his British readership.

Willmott also reaches potentially controversial conclusions about several American admirals who fought in the Pacific. He believes that Admirals Robert Lee Ghormley and Frank Jack Fletcher were far better than their treatment by their peers and their subsequent reputations would suggest. Conversely, Willmott alleges that Admiral Marc Mitscher “deliberately falsified” the battle report of USS *Hornet* following the battle of Midway and that both Admirals Raymond Spruance and Chester Nimitz were aware of it. These assertions stand out all the more strongly in a work where individuals are rarely discussed.

Readers who finish both volumes will be forgiven if they find themselves eagerly awaiting the third. The changes and events of the second half of the century provide ample material for Willmott’s discerning eye and razor-sharp tongue. It is clear that the rise of Soviet maritime power must be an item for discussion, as will be the emergence of nuclear power and of maritime contributions to nuclear deterrence.

It remains to be seen, though, whether Willmott will be as bold in discussing failures of leadership in his third volume and whether he is as ready to take issue with the leaders of the Cold War as he was with their earlier counterparts. Based on his suggestion that the U.S. decision to go to war with Iraq was made with the same rush and deliberate propagandizing that marked the decision to war with Spain in 1898, it would appear that he is.

Perhaps the greatest question the third volume will answer is the riddle of the trilogy’s title. Does Willmott truly believe that the twentieth century was the *last* century of sea power, not simply the most recent? John Keagan suggested as much in his work *The Price of Admiralty*, only to be proved wrong. It will be most interesting to see what Willmott has to say on the subject.