

Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

At van Wyk: *Honoris Crux – Ons Dapperes/ Our Brave: Saayman en Weber, Kaapstad, R14,75.*

Toekennings word gedurig aan persone gemaak en daar bestaan ook 'n mate van senioriteit in sekere kategorieë van betrokke toekennings. Dink maar net hoe hoog 'n Oscar-, Emmy-, Artes- of Hertzogprystoekening aangeskryf word. In die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag is dit ook die geval met die *Honoris Crux*-dekorasie wat vir buitengewone dapperheid toegeken word.

At van Wyk het my sy boek, *Honoris Crux*, 'n optekening gemaak van 'n aantal soldate wat alreeds met die *Honoris Crux* vereër is om so 'n leemte in hierdie Suid-Afrikaanse lektuur te begin vul. Hierdie publikasie was 'n uitgebreide studie, want Van Wyk het onderhoude met elkeen van die draers gevoer en om soveel materiaal te verwerk in die bestek van een boek, wil gedoen wees. Die verskillende gebeurtenisse is kort en kragtig behandel en die opskrifte was baie gepas.

Die boek is baie volledig, maar ongelukkig is daar heelwat haakplekke. In die eerste plek kon die skrywer nie besluit watter vertellerstrant hy wou gebruik nie. Hier sal 'n mens moet besluit of jy slegs die gebeure wil beskryf om dit net op te teken of om dit te dramatiseer. Wanneer laasgenoemde gekies word, moenie net op die feite gekonsentreer word nie, maar moet daar ook geborduur word op die ekstra dingetjies wat vir die leser interessant mag wees ... daar moet dus amper na fiksie oorgegaan word, alhoewel dit steeds ware verhale is. Ongelukkig probeer die skrywer hierdie twee kombineer wat tot gevolg het dat die boek baie moeilik lees en dat die leser baie moet konsentreer om alles in te neem. Wat my veral gehinder het, was die oormatige gebruik van datums en plekke, maar weer eens moet ek beklemtoon dat indien die boek as geskiedskrywing bedoel was, die datums en plekke onontbeerlik was. Die dramatiserings sou dan ook heeltemal onvanpas wees. Dit blyk dus dat die doel van die boek nooit werklik vooraf bepaal is nie. Volgens my, kon die boek as historiese fiksie beslis geslaag het, want die skrywer het al die materiaal tot sy beskikking gehad. Miskien kan Van Wyk in die toekoms twee publikasies die lig laat sien – een vir die historikus en een vir die man in die straat.

Die taalgebruik laat ook met tye veel te wense oor en ongelukkig het 'n paar lelike setfoute deurgesluip, wat baie afbreuk doen aan so 'n volledige werk.

Honoris Crux is op die Afrikaanse Diens van die SAUK voorgelees en die praatjies was baie populêr, terwyl die boek self ook baie goed verkoop. Daar is beslis ook nie nêr kritiek op die boek te lewer nie, want soos ek gesê het, is dit 'n baie volledige studie. Daar is ook 'n beskrywing van die verskillende dekorasies sowel as 'n lys en foto's van die ontvangers van die *Honoris Crux*. Die alfabetiese indeks is ook baie volledig en beslis 'n aanwinst tot die boek.

At van Wyk het met *Honoris Crux* 'n begin gemaak om 'n nuwe veld te ontgin en hy verdien beslis die eer wat hom alreeds toegeswaai is. 'n Mens kan maar net hoop dat hierdie navorsing nie net by *Honoris Crux* gaan bly nie, maar dat dit in die toekoms uitgebrei sal word.

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The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660–1783: A.T. Mahan (Boston – Little, Brown and Company, 1949); 541 pages plus preface and index. (Price unknown).

The author of this book, Alfred Thatcher Mahan, is to naval warfare what Clausewitz is to land warfare and his books are the source of many quotations and arguments over strategy, and above all, the meaning of seapower. It was thus with a feeling of renewing an old acquaintance-ship that I approached this attractively bound green and gold book.

Mahan wrote this book in 1889 during his tenure on the staff of the US Naval Academy and immediately established his reputation as a naval strategist with its publication. His ideas have stood the test of time and are still valid ninety years later and although obviously the advent of the aircraft has influenced the effect of sea power since the 19th century the author still manages to bring home the importance of sea power by describing how various naval affairs influenced the course of history.

When reading this book one has to bear in mind the time and circumstances when it was written. In 1889 the United States Navy was in a weak and run-down condition and Mahan's book is thus aimed at re-awakening his own authorities to the dangers of the USA in relying on a purely coastal navy or a few commerce raiders as a means of enforcing US Naval Power. He makes frequent reference to this throughout the text. Similarly it must be remembered that Great Britain as it was then popularly called was then at the height of its Victorian power and thus the very model of how seapower should be applied. Britain's hereditary enemy and at that time major opponent was France and throughout the book Mahan displays a strong pro-French sentiment which however does not prevent him from treating his subject fairly.

Although he tends to jump around in time a bit and tends to repeat himself Mahan illustrates his point competently and immediately. In his preface to his book he takes the reader back to the Punic wars between Rome and Carthage and points out there that the reason Hannibal had to cross the Alps with his elephants – a well known incident in history – was for the lesser known reason that Rome controlled the sea. When an exhausted Hannibal arrived in Italy after an overland trek through Spain the defeat inflicted on him by Scipio was to a large extent due to the Roman galleys controlling the Mediterranean. He draws a similar parallel here to Wellington's defeat of Napoleon in the Peninsular Wars.

In a lengthy introduction he very cleverly distinguishes between strategy and tactics by the use of the word CONTACT. (i.e. Strategy leads to the initial meeting, after that *contact*, tactics take over) and then goes on to a discussion of the elements of seapower which favourably or unfavourably affect the growth of seapower in nations. To do this he names the character and policy of governments and national characteristics to cite but two examples. He considers these elements and then illustrates how they affect seapower by using particular examples in the past. For instance, British National character is such that alone amongst the colonising nations her settlers invariably tended to develop their colonies as new homes, not distant places of exile from the motherland. The upshot was that the British colonies developed infrastructures which could support fleets and thus support and extension of seapower.

After the introduction Mahan's book becomes a

fascinating catalogue of battles illustrating his thesis and the growth of British seapower. When the book commences in 1660 Holland was a seapower to be reckoned with. This seapower preserved Dutch independence against both Spain and France. However in any competition there is no room for two winners. Britain, or England as it was then, treated Holland as an enemy under any pretext until the War of Spanish Succession drained Holland and the other Continental powers of their ability to threaten England's seapower. Once Holland was no longer a rival she automatically became an ally of England because of a common outlook, a fact which still applies today.

He illustrates the case of Portugal, England's oldest ally whose politicians had the wit to realise that English seapower could not only cut her off from her colonies with their subsequent loss but could also bring England right up the Tagus. For this reason Portugal would fight and chance invasion from Spain, her neighbour, rather than upset England.

England always aimed at seapower, even while taking part in Continental wars, basing this aim on the following quote: 'Military wisdom and economy, both of time and money, dictate bringing matters to an issue as soon as possible upon the broad sea, with the certainty that the power which achieves military preponderance there will win in the end'. She rapidly found out the value of overseas bases in which role her colonies performed admirably and the need for continuous up to date information – a need for which she found the answer in a fleet of fast frigates. Although her main fault was stretching a thin line of ships everywhere inadequate over an immense frontier, the policy of carrying the war to the enemy by sea was firmly understood. Because the possession of armed seapower is seldom accompanied by a regard for the rights of others, England was able to impose her will on the neutral seafaring nations and even at the height of the great wars of the centuries under discussion prospered because of her ability to carry on seaborne trade. Although her drive for power sometimes faltered due to mutual misunderstanding of each other by her army and navy or by undue reliance on older officers after long periods of peace, at the end of the Seven Years War in 1763 the Kingdom of England had grown into the British Empire (which included Canada, India and the West Indies) and which lasted into modern living memory.

Such gains were at the expense of Spain and France. Spain never had the ability to become a 'seapower' as such and because of her position on the continent tended universally to ally herself with France against England to remedy this fault. France had the ability to become a seapower but tended always to look inwards towards the continent for expansion. This entire book, notwithstanding sympathetic treatment from Mahan, is a sorry tale of French incompetence at sea. This incompetence drained both France and Spain by losing them their colonies and overseas trade and during the time of Louis XV led to the humiliation of France on more than one occasion.

The present day partition of Ireland can be traced to King James II's defeat by William of Orange at the Battle of Boyne due to his promised French sea-borne support not arriving. Naval inferiority off the coast of India led to Dupleix's defeat by Clive and France's loss of that empire. The list is endless. On only one occasion in the whole book was seapower correctly applied by the French and that was when Suffren fought a series of running battles against Hughes off the coast of India. With the right subordinates Mahan feels that Suffren off India could have altered the course of history by cutting off Clive and making India French, but this was destined to be otherwise. The author makes a very good point in this question which could be applied to our own SA Navy today and was certainly applicable to his own US Navy of the time. – 'The dependence of Trincomalee upon the English fleet in the campaign affords an excellent illustration of the embarrassment and false position in which a navy finds itself when the defence of its seaports rests upon it. This bears upon a much debated point of the present day, and is worthy of the study of those who maintain too unqualifiedly, that the best coast defence is a Navy. In one sense this is doubtless true, – to attack the enemy abroad is the best of defences, but in the narrow sense of the word 'defence' it is not true. Trincomalee unfortified was simply a centre around which Hughes had to revolve like a tethered animal, and the same will always happen under like conditions.'

The remainder of the book is taken up by a detailed summary of the naval operations in the American Revolutionary War which was essentially a naval war conducted along rivers and estuaries with the British forces being cut off ashore and forced to surrender. The war led to battles in the West Indies between great admirals such as Howe, Rodney, Hood and De Grasse and the tactics displayed although outdated are food for thought. A minor difficulty here is that the author refers throughout to the 'allied' fleets meaning France and Spain (the enemy being England) which tends to jar on modern readers used to England being one of the 'allies.'

The book in closing refers to the blockade set up by the English of the French coast and which gave rise to the saying 'iron men in wooden ships'. The blockade contrary to modern belief was not to keep the French in port, but to fall upon them and destroy them when they came out. The effect was to turn the English into hardened and competent seamen and the French into seasick landlubbers with the passage of time. Another effect was the following quotation which could easily apply to our modern navy 'During the last war (of 1778) we had met the greatest difficulty in supplying officers to our ships. If it had been easy to name admirals, commodores and captains, it had been impossible to fill the vacancies caused by death, sickness and promotion among officers of the rank of lieutenant and ensign.'

This book, which has a comprehensive index, is well worth the study of all naval officers. As Mahan proves, history has a way of repeating itself. The present day dispositions of the Soviet Navy with its search for bases, its projection of power, disregard on occasions for the rights of neutrals and its lengthy seagoing deployments as a blue-water navy bear an uncanny resemblance to the growth of the British Navy of Mahan's time. Much can be learned from this book and as such I highly recommended it to all those engaged in the study of naval strategy.

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