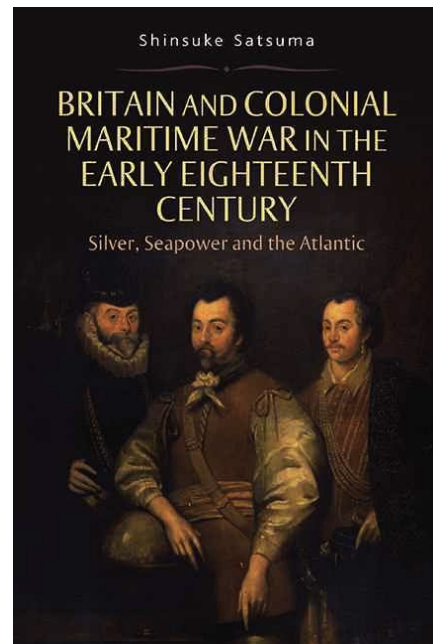


Shinsuke SATSUMA: *Britain and Colonial Maritime War in the Early Eighteenth Century: Silver, Seapower and the Atlantic*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2013, 296 pp., ISBN: 978118438623.

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The Political Debates that Shaped British Seapower in the Eighteenth Century.

Eighteenth-century military history most readily brings to mind images of large professional armies in the field, manoeuvring and squaring off in the century's many, exhausting 'cabinet wars'. The rise of Russia and Prussia as great powers were the two great developments in the international system. Yet every bit as dramatic was the rise of Britain as a sea power. From a small-to-medium power on the edge of Europe, Britain emerged from a century of desperate competition, primarily with France, as a new sort of international player, a naval superpower. With Napoleon defeated, the utility of Britain's unassailable naval strength was indisputable. In the post-1815 world the value of navies as tools of diplomacy, of trade protection and economic warfare, of military support and power projection and even of domestic political consensus and stability were clear for all to see. The history of the rise of Britain's navy must, therefore, also stand as one of the great pillars of the eighteenth century.



In this book, Shinsuke Satsuma provides a very useful service by addressing the intellectual origins of Britain's naval policy, such as it was. This has long been recognised as having emerged from a domestic political argument, or lobby, which Satsuma chooses to call the 'pro-maritime war argument'. Yet for all the significance ascribed to those early adherents of the value of aggressive war at sea, the debate they had with those who rated war on land more highly or who simply valued interests on the continent has always been treated by historians rather simply. Here, we get the first full discussion of the variations, fluctuations, and origins of the maritime argument, including the common ground with its so-called opponents, and, importantly, its practical effect. This study provides a convincing insight into how the argument for war for largely economic motives, and fought primarily at sea, managed to 'win' the domestic political debate and to have such lasting impact.

The book begins with the long history of this argument from its Elizabethan origins, important because the memory of this earlier period was so often invoked by adherents in the

eighteenth century. The focus of the book, however, is very appropriately on the period from 1702 and the War of the Spanish Succession when the pro-maritime war argument, following a slight hiatus, became especially vocal and politically important. Through a careful reading of contemporary pamphlets and other writings, Satsuma dissects the main strands of the economic case that was made for war. Interception of Spanish silver fleets and colonial expeditions, it was claimed, could be undertaken for economic and strategic reasons, that is to say to weaken Spain, possibly even by inciting rebellion in the Americas. Purely commercial motives, however, were also voiced. The argument, Satsuma contends, was not just far from uniform but it was also politically charged, a contested idea that shifted according to political fortune. So, initially, war at sea was presented as a complement to the continental struggle whilst the idea that it should be pursued instead of, and therefore as a tacit criticism of, the conduct of the continental war only emerged later. The effect of these arguments on government policy and legislation is also shown to challenge some of the simpler assumptions that historians sometimes hold. It was never a question of one approach or the other. Opposition politicians tended to argue the pro-maritime war case, but those in government were not necessarily unconvinced. They simply had to deal with the realities of a continental war. As N.A.M. Rodger has pointed out, across the political spectrum there was broad support, in principle at least, for the navy.

In practical terms, operations to attack the Spanish fleet were the most popular, whilst the idea of more ambitious and costly colonial expeditions divided opinion, and such operations did not materialise due to administrative and organisational problems and the need to coordinate actions with the Dutch. Yet by shifting the blame for this and other failures onto individuals or to particular circumstances, the case for the longer-term advantage of colonial enterprises survived unscathed. Interestingly, however, Satsuma shows how British policy after the Peace of Utrecht of 1714 evolved in light of growing commercial interests in the Americas. In particular, he argues that the South Sea Company, which triggered the famous financial crisis of 1720, did not just have commercial but also military ambitions. This combination of motives, more generally, made it difficult for the government to enact legislation or policies which could at once promote privateering and conquest, in other words to respond to both the growing commercial interest in the area and the vested interest based in the Caribbean, primarily Jamaica, in illicit trade and violence. It was the *asiento*, in particular, the monopoly of the slave carrying trade between Africa and Spanish America which Britain won by the terms of the Peace of Utrecht, which made the case for the protection of commercial interests rather than the aggressive pursuit of war stronger.

Of course, relations with Spain were very quickly strained after 1714, and it is in the context of the eruption of open war in what has been called the War of Jenkins' Ear from 1739 that the pro-maritime war argument is usually discussed by historians, usually as a debate between opposition politicians and the government. Here, Satsuma again identifies an interesting pattern. A pro-maritime war argument of sorts was, in fact, initially used by government

to win support for mobilisation against Spain. Only latterly was it taken up in earnest in a ‘propaganda campaign’ calling for full-scale war against Spain at sea. By breaking down such certainties, Satsuma builds up to what is in many ways the most important, final chapter because here we see the origins of what would evolve to become the closest thing to a fully thought-through naval strategy in eighteenth-century Britain. This involved a more ‘precautionary’ approach in which Britain’s enemies were contained in European waters, rather than confronted in risky overseas contests of strength, and which revealed a growing acceptance that the navy’s primary role was as a protector of trade. It is interesting to see this familiar approach to British seapower emerging from within the context of the political challenges the government faced and the complexities of the arguments described in this book, rather than as simply a question of long-term strategic calculation or natural institutional evolution. After 1714, the British government needed to safeguard the interests of the South Sea Company, and its reluctance to pursue an aggressive anti-Spanish war is presented here by Satsuma as logical and sensible, not simply the result of wrong-headed obstinacy.

This book does a good job of challenging the overly neat compartmentalization between government and opposition, or between continentalists and maritime war proponents, that is so often applied. In the process it provides insight into some of the bigger issues of the period. The argument is very carefully constructed and organised, indeed so carefully that it occasionally betrays its origins as a PhD thesis, but this is not a criticism as such. The carefully elaborated case and the extensive research undertaken simply inspire confidence in the measured, but still important, conclusions drawn. With respect to the promise expressed in the subtitle, readers can expect to learn more about sea power, or at least how it was discussed and understood in Britain early in the century, than about silver, as such, or about the Atlantic. Yet this is a valuable ambition and it is met here with real authority.