John Bach, *The Australia Station: A History of the Royal Navy in the South West Pacific, 1821-1913.* Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1986. Pp. xii, 260, maps, illustrations, bibliography, appendixes, indexes. A$29.95.

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The best way to tackle John Bach's impressive *The Australia Station* is carefully to read and then re-read his introductory chapter, wherein he identifies the limitations imposed on his study. It is to be the story of the Royal Navy in Australia told from the Navy standpoint, and "only indirectly concerned with the accepted traditional themes of Australian history." The purpose, he says, is "to honour the memory, in however modest and imperfect a fashion, of a great institution, the existence of which, however much we may seek to ignore it, allowed us to become what we are" (p. 4).

Thus we are to expect a fairly narrow account of a specific institutional activity, addressed to a national audience already well informed about the political circumstances that attended it. However, a widely shared sense of, and interest in, the theater in which ships of the Australia Station ranged, far beyond Australian waters, should give it much broader appeal.

Dr. Bach has organized his work topically rather than according to strict chronology. The second chapter, "Origin of the Australia Station 1821-59," really goes back to the days of Governor Phillip and his successors over the previous thirty years, whose needs were ill-met by ships "unsuitable in design or in unserviceable condition." It was in 1821 that arrangements finally were made for a proper warship to be detached from the East India Squadron for service at New South Wales. A few years later responsibility of the naval command was extended to cover New Zealand and the Friendly and the Society Islands. However, the Australia Station as such did not come into existence until March of 1859, when it was designated a separate command, with Captain William Loring, in *Iris,* as its commodore.

Midway during this time, developments, recounted in chapter 3 covering the "Tahiti Fiasco-- 1842-47," threatened armed conflict between the British and French naval commanders in the Society Islands. The crisis showed how a capable officer on the scene (Captain John Toup Nicolas), with no means of timely communication with his superiors, could be utterly thwarted by standing instructions that were ambiguous and evasive.

The author turns next to the relationships between the Royal Navy and the influx of traders--mostly English--coming into the islands, and between them both and the ever-vocal missionaries. The Navy was expected to protect the native inhabitants from white depredation, and on the other hand to punish the not-always-noble savages for outrages that they indulged in from time to time. These were mainly police and juridical duties for which naval officers were seldom prepared and

which could, if things went awry, result in embarrassment, censure, and imposition of damages. Bach traces the twists and turns of official policy in such matters-- rendered all the more irksome by chronic tension between naval and civil authority. Typical was the problem of the labor trade, which became increasingly offensive in the 1860s, leading to adoption of the Imperial Kidnapping Act of 1872 along with a set of vague and uncertain directives loosely derived from the (African) Slave Trade Instructions.

We next turn to consideration of the Maori Wars (1845-1864); of "Colonial Services" (for example, hydrographic survey, transportation of dignitaries); of the contention over Samoa, ending in Britain's withdrawal in 1900; of Fiji and Tonga where the British were more successful (annexing the former as a Crown Colony in 1874, and declaring a protectorate over the latter in 1901); and of the establishemnt of the office of High Commissioner for the Western Pacific in 1877. This last grew out of the need to provide some form of jurisdiction and authority over British subjects residing in islands outside regular colonial control. The move gave rise to a whole new series of complexities, but one good feature was the designation of the incumbent commodore with the additional title of deputy high commissioner authorized to take direct action against miscreants.

In touching on the international rivalry for influence and commercial advantage in the South Pacific, the author treats the French and their ambitions with particular distaste. The French navy, he says, "quickly demonstrated that it was not handicapped by the legal inhibitions shown by its British counterpart." Nevertheless, the joint Anglo-French "Mixed Naval Commission" set up in 1887 to maintain order and to protect persons and property in the New Hebrides seems to have functioned fairly well, in spite of the divergent methods and attitudes of the participants.

The author says little about Germany's commercial penetration in the Pacific islands, initiated by the Godeffroys in the 1850s, or about the program of colonial expansion adopted by Bismarck in 1884, even though the German presence ultimately grew to become a major threat. After all, the northerly limit of the Australia Station (after 1864) excluded most of New Guinea and the northern tier of islands where the Germans were busiest. Aside from the confrontation over Samoa their diligence seems to have done little at the time to arouse concern.

The touchy relationships between the colonists, with their push for local naval forces under their own control, and the Admiralty, with its

broader view of Empire defense, dominate the remainder of this history of the Australia Station. Introducing the subject in "The Navy and Imperial Defence" (chapter 12), Bach writes: "The Australia Station squadron was part of an imperial organization, manned by imperial not colonial officers and however unpalatable it may be to modern nationalist historians, the Imperial Navy's view of the colonies was inevitably that taken by a superior to a subordinate, in which the interests of the inferior are naturally subsumed in those of the superior. . . . This view, that the sum of things is best preserved when the centre is held, was unacceptable to those colonists who translated it as meaning that in a global war they were expendable" (p. 172). The Naval Defence Act of 1865 and the "naval reforms" (that is, cutbacks) instigated by Hugh Childers and enacted in 1869 aggravated the controversy, even as they compromised Britain's posture in the Pacific. As time went on, "the senior officers and the admiralty also spent much time reiterating to the disbelieving colonial authorities the fundamental truth that the Navy was concerned with the defence of the whole Empire and not just that of Australia, a concept that meant, in theory at least, that the squadrons located physically in the waters of a particular station were not to be seen as being restricted to the defence of that region. They were not regional fleets . . . but were rather temporarily dispersed elements of a single naval force" (p. 186).

By 1890, in the face of compelling strategic developments, the entire concept of foreign stations came under critical scrutiny, even though the need for Australia and New Zealand to contribute somehow to their own regional defense remained. Bach traces the arguments and concessions of the next two decades largely in terms of these issues, and largely from the Admiralty's viewpoint. He sees the situation as ending in stalemate--resolved at last by creation of the Royal Australian Navy and by the events of 1914.

The Australia Station concludes with a narrative of the development of the Sydney Naval Base and an outline of the social aspects of the Royal Navy in Australia, of mostly parochial interest.

This is a work of great scope, probably definitive as a chronicle of the Royal Navy's actions in furtherance and protection of British interests in the Southwest Pacific from the time of Governor Macquarie to the time in 1913 when the functions of the Australia Station passed to the Royal Australian Navy. It is based to a large extent on the author's 1963 University of New South Wales doctoral thesis, "The Royal Navy in the South Pacific, 1826-1876," with additional research performed in 1981

to bring it up to 1913. The resultant work has been criticized as inadequately updated--somewhat unfairly, considering the set nature of academic productions and the fact that more recent writings, although they may enrich or reinterpret, do not amend the basic research.[1]

More to the point is the difficulty of converting the kind of narrow, rigorous presentation preferred by a doctoral committee into writing that does justice to situations that are inherently colorful and lively. Often in this history we sense great drama but are left to imagine it for ourselves. Only once does the author let himself go, with a narration of the Apia hurricane of 1889 based on the account of H. G. Kane, commanding HMS *Calliope,* a passage most readers will remember.[2]

We are forewarned not to expect traditional themes, but there are times when more than passing reference to technological developments --the advent of steam, screw propulsion, armor, and electronic communications--is needed to show how profoundly they affected naval operations in the Pacific in the nineteenth century. Also the general reader needs more orientation and summary than the author has provided; not everyone is familiar with Australian history, nor owns a copy of the *Historical Dictionary of Oceania.*

Altogether admirable is the care with which the book has been furnished with maps, illustrations, chapter notes, bibliography, appendixes, indexes, and a splendid dust jacket. Chapter notes are placed where they belong, instead of at the end of the text. Illustrations are scattered throughout, rather than being cheaply bunched in a separate gathering. The endpapers by L. J. Henderson--showing the 1859, 1864, 1872, 1893, and 1908 limits of the Australia Station--are most useful.

On balance, this is a splendid production, for which both the author and the New South Wales University Press are to be congratulated.

NOTES

1. James A. Boutilier in *Pacific History Bibliography and Comment,* 1987: 41-42.

2. This reader prefers R. L. Stevenson's narrative, and his description of the scene after the storm: "Conceive a table: the *Eber* in the darkness had been smashed against the rim and flung below; the *Adler,* cast free in the nick of opportunity, had been thrown upon the top. . . . In all weather, under a cloudless sky, in those seasons when that ill-named ocean, the Pacific, suffers its vexed shores to rest, she lies high and dry, the spray scarce touching her--the hugest structure of man's hands within a circuit of a thousand miles--tossed up there like a schoolboy's cap on a shelf; broken like an egg; a thing to dream of" (*A Footnote to History; Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa* [New York, 1892], 253-254).