

Fisherman, the Fishing Industry and the Great War at Sea by Robb Robinson
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In this ambitious new history of the British fishing industry during the Great War and its aftermath, Robb Robinson has produced an all-encompassing single volume addressing the myriad of roles to which it was employed during the conflict. As the author is keen to point out, the 39,000 fishermen and 3,000 fishing vessels which served Britain during the conflict quite often seemed to receive tertiary, if any attention in the contemporary discussions, publications and recent national exhibitions surrounding the centenary of the Great War.

The book begins with an overview of the fishing industry of the Edwardian period. The author shows that it was the largest and most developed industry of its type in the world. He shows that in particular the North Sea trawler fleets and to a lesser degree the drifter fleets of the Channel, Irish Sea and elsewhere had reaped the benefits to be had from steam power. The steam trawler and drifter fleets were ideal for naval service in a number of roles.

The skills required to operate day after day at sea in small vessels, hauling heavy gear in all weathers were naturally the same needed to sweep mines and lay antisubmarine nets. For example, otter boards and paravanes were little different in deployment and use and fishermen were able to quickly become experienced minesweepers. This had been recognised by the Admiralty in the immediate pre-war years with establishment of the Royal Naval Reserve (Trawler Section), or RNR (T).

At the outbreak of hostilities, it was the minesweeping effort which saw a growing casualty list as the Germans laid large ship-deployed minefields off the East Coast. The development of the East Coast War Channels and the need to constantly sweep and patrol them became a key role throughout the war. But as Robinson shows, the roles to which Britain's fishermen were deployed were in fact far more varied. They went on to become the major component of the Auxiliary Patrol in all of its sectors around Britain. A chapter also describes the role of the fisherman in operations overseas, which included the Dardanelles, the White Sea and the Otranto barrage.

Whereas the RNR (T) was deployed to primarily the defensive duty of minesweeping, the Auxiliary Patrol, founded in 1915 was an improvised navy, operating offensively against the U-boat threat. This inevitably led the fishermen into fighting with the growing U-boat force, of which the author describes several examples. A total of 3,338 skippers and ratings were to die in the service of the Auxiliary Patrol. The author says this understates the losses because, the additional number of fishermen who died in the service of the RNR is not known as their original occupation cannot be ascertained from the existing casualty data.

It is noteworthy, the author says, that the expansion of the Auxiliary Patrol heavily depleted Britain's fishing fleet, so that by September 1916 only 500 trawlers remained in private hands, with over 1,300 having been taken up by the Admiralty. This ultimately led to an Admiralty building program which ordered over 900 extra fishing vessels during the war.

By 1917 these vessels were receiving heavier armament, hydrophones and depth-charges and were able to operate as convoy escorts.

Aside from prosecuting the war, fishing had to be maintained during because, more than ever the nation had to be fed. The author describes how the fishing fleet were often on the maritime front line, with 416 civilian fisherman being killed. This included several incidents where U-boats were involved in the mass sinkings of trawlers in large batches. The September 26 1916 incident where U57 sank 13 Scarborough trawlers in one afternoon being a notable example.

The fishing vessels were not always entirely innocent bystanders. As the author describes there was a concerted effort to arm fishing boats, both conventionally and as Q-Ships. The establishment of the Fishery Reserve gave fishermen the opportunity to fight it out with an aggressive U-boat. A notable example of such an action involved the running fight between U53 and a line ahead formation of six trawlers led by *Conan Doyle*. The U-boat escaped, but all of the trawlers survived.

I have only one criticism of this book. The German side of the conflict is not really addressed in any detail. The minelayers and U-boats come and go from the narrative but do not themselves speak. Neither does the German strategic vision on Britain's fishing fleet feature. This is pity as it may have helped contextualise some of the events the book depicts. This does not however, detract from what is a very useful and well-researched history of an oft overlooked aspect of the Great War at Sea 1914-18 and it is recommended to members.

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