

Before the Battlecruiser: The Big Cruiser in the World's Navies 1865-1910 by Aidan Dodson

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In a book which could at first sight be considered a detailed history of the armoured cruiser, it says much of the assiduous nature of the author's research that this type of warship is not mentioned in the title. In fact to have done so would have been inaccurate, because the book examines a broader range of vessels which the author is quite specific in identifying. As he points out there was often a distinct lack of consistency of definitions appended to larger naval vessels during the period under study. So the designed and actual roles of the ships needed to be identified to draw them into a coherent group. The author identifies these roles as: the capability to act as a capital ship on distant station; to act as the fast wing of the battlefleet; to function as a commerce raider and as a hunter of enemy commerce raiders. Importantly, vessels of the type were in the main much larger than the ordinary cruisers of the era. Several examples were not equipped with side armour, relying on an armoured deck only, ruling them out as being defined as armoured cruisers.

This broad class of vessels begins to be defined by the first of the 2nd class ironclads of the 1860s. The rapid evolution of warships which characterises this period sees the emergence of the armoured cruisers in the 1870s. This was typified in Russia by the *General-Admiral* armoured cruiser and in Britain by the *Shannon*. The final armoured cruisers, such as the French *Waldeck-Rousseau*, the German *Blücher* and British *Minotaur* were all to be quickly made obsolete by the all-big-gun and turbine powered battlecruisers which began to appear in 1907 with the British *Invincible*. As the author points out, the battlecruisers were not simply a manifestation of what some have perceived as the "year zero" of the dreadnought revolution, but in fact the lineal heirs of design principles extending back to the age of sail, as is evident throughout the book.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is made up of eight chapters which provide a broad textual history of the big cruiser from its genesis to its slow demise after WW1. All of the world's navies which employed big cruisers are described. For example, it is interesting to note, that the last commissioned big cruiser was Argentina's *Peuyrredón* which saw service until 1953.

The technological changes and international rivalry which dominate this period are well described. For example, the author shows how with the construction of *Belliqueuse* in France in 1863, she became the first nation to build an armoured ship (on wooden frames) which could operate on overseas service. The British reaction being the development of *Audacious* in 1868, designed to be able to operate on the China Station to counter the perceived French threat to Britain's overseas interests. In fact the author identifies that Britain's initial development of big cruisers can be generally considered reactive to French and Russian innovations.

The second part of the book is made up of 14 chapters, one for each of the nations of the world which operated big cruisers. The chapters focus on the technical and career details of each ship. Anyone familiar with the author's previous book, *The Kaiser's Battlefleet* (2016) will notice the similar style of schematic used to show the career span (in and out of commission) of each ship and the useful mini line drawings of each class of ship and occasional plating diagrams. Gathering a

consistent level of data covering the lesser studied nations of South America and the Far East must have been a challenge, but the overall effort feels comprehensive.

Throughout the book an extensive range of photographs illustrates the key classes of ships. The National Maritime Museum's ongoing digitisation of its ship's plans has been used in a colour fold-out section which features 12 drawings of Britain's armoured cruisers from *Shannon* (launched 1877) to *Minotaur* (launched 1906). Budgetary constraints notwithstanding, it is a shame that they were not used more extensively. The book is rounded off with a useful series of maps which shows the engagements fought by big cruisers around the world and the locations where they were sunk.

As the author concedes, certain aspects of this book are not unique. In a crowded market, there are other titles which detail the development of the big cruiser, particularly in the USA and in Britain. However the author describes all of the big cruisers of the world's navies, drawing on previously untapped sources to produce a comprehensive history, consistent in detail across all nations and ship classes. This was no mean achievement. The book therefore is undoubtedly a useful reference source for anyone with an interest in the broad development of the armoured ship from big cruiser to battlecruiser and the historic and global contexts in which these developments took place.

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