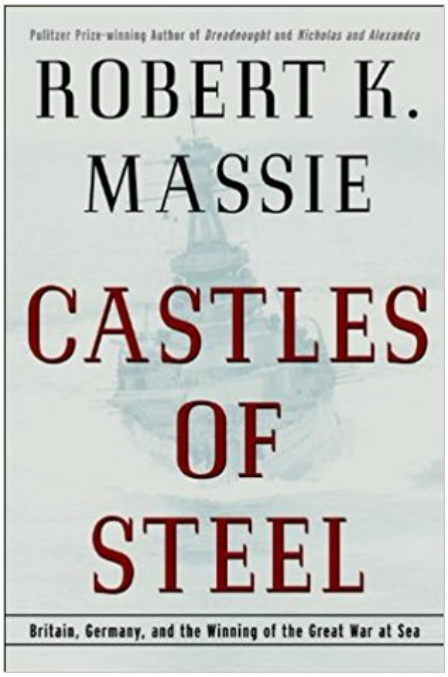

Castles of Steel

Robert K. Massie

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In August 1914 the two greatest navies in the world confronted each other across the North Sea. At first there were skirmishes, then battles off the coasts of England and Germany and in the far corners of the world, including the Falklands. The British attempted to force the Dardanelles with battleships - which led to the Gallipoli catastrophe. As the stalemate on the ground on the Western Front continued, the German Navy released a last strike against the British 'ring of steel'. The result was Jutland, a titanic and brutal battle between dreadnoughts. The knowledge, understanding and literary power Robert K. Massie brings to this story is unparalleled. There will never again be a war like this in which seagoing monsters hurl shells at each other until one side is destroyed. The story is driven by some of the most dramatically intriguing personalities in history: Churchill and Jacky Fisher, Jellicoe and Beatty. And then there were the powerful Germans - von Pohl, Scheer, Hipper, and the grand old fork-bearded genius Tirpitz. Castles of Steel is a book about leadership and command, bravery and timidity, genius and folly, qualities which are of course displayed magnificently by Robert K. Massie's literary mastery.

Castles of Steel Details

Date	:	Published October 28th 2003 by Random House (first published 2003)
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From Reader Review Castles of Steel for online ebook

Megargee says

In his previous history Dreadnaught, which I have not read, naval historian Robert Massie described how Britain and France built the two greatest surface fleets in the world, centered around the massive, heavily armored battleships whose massive guns could fire heavy exploding shells at target miles away. In this equally massive 865 page tome he depicts the conflict between these two navies during WW I.
When most of think of WW I, we think of the stalemated trench warfare across Belgium and France, a war of mud, rifles, and bayonets. However, long after the conflict British Admiral Jellicoe wrote that as First Sea Lord, his task was "...to make the Prime Minister realize that the whole of the Allied cause was dependent on the Grand Fleet holding the surface command of the sea." (p. 746). As an island Britain was dependent the sea for vital imports of food, fuel, and war supplies. If the German High Seas Fleet could roam the Atlantic it could blockade the UK and starve it into submission. Instead by bottling up the German surface fleet, the British were able to impose a North Seas blockade that deprived the Central powers of the raw materials and rations they required. The only way the Germans and their allies could retaliate was by attacking under the water with submarines and mines. It was unrestricted submarine warfare directed at all surface shipping, mercantile as well as warships and neutral vessels as well as combatants, that eventually brought America into the war which tipping the balance in favor of the Allies.
Castles of Steel works at many levels. Massie writes gripping accounts of naval battles that rival the fictional tales of C. S. Forester and Patrick O. Brian. He paints vivid personal portraits of the admirals on both sides, Scheer, Hipper, and Tirpitz for the Germans and Fisher, Jellicoe, and Beatty as well as the young Winston Churchill for the Brits, not to mention the political figures such as the Kaiser, whose timidity kept the German surface fleet at anchor for most of the war, and American President Woodrow Wilson, who did his best to keep the US out of the war.
Nor does he neglect the behind the scenes stories such as how British Code Room 40 broke the German naval codes early in the war so they were able to warn the British when the German fleet sallied forth. How the British gunners kept the passages to their magazines open to speed their rate of fire so that a hit on the turret caused the whole battle cruiser to blow up with all hands. "There seems to be something wrong with our bloody ships today," Beatty observed when yet another exploded. (P. 596.) Nor are Adm. Beatty's (and Mrs. Adm. Beatty's) love affairs overlooked.
Less interesting to me were the accounts of how after battles such as Dogger Bank and Jutland as well as the Dardanelles campaign and Gallipoli, partisans and politicians rushed to claim credit or cast blame on the principal figures such as Jellicoe, Beatty, and Churchill, a practice that was as true among the Germans as the British.
While it is the naval action and strategies that are the primary focus, Massie provides context by describing the political maneuvering and blunders that led to the war and the peace negotiations leading to the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the conflict. The book is amply provided with notes, and references as well as maps and photographs of the people and the ships.

Bas Kreuger says

A slight, but only very, very slight, disappointment in reading Castles of Steel. Massie again writes compulsive and with an eye for detail, but what I miss is the view from both sides as he did in "Dreadnought" where the thoughts and actions of the leading politicians and naval officers was examined.

After finishing "Dreadnought" I had a much better understanding how WWI came about and how and why the Germans and Brits clashed over their naval policy.
"CoS" has less policy and diplomacy and much more strategy and thought and feel for the battles in WWI. Specially the early battles of Coronel and the Falklands gave me an almost Medieval sense of chivalry and despondancy of both commanders, Craddock and Von Spee.
The later naval efforts were more in line with the feeling that Britain could lose the war in an afternoon while Germany had not much to gain from a naval victory by its Hochsee Flotte.
The choice Germany made for unrestricted submarine warfare and the way they almost got Britain on her knees was revelling for me. At a certain point Britain had only for six weeks foodstuff left. Germany came close, but because they hadn't planned for such an operation and thus had not build sufficient numbers of submarine, they could not succeed and esspecially not when the US entered the war and brought its industrial might in play.
The end, where revolutionay sailors in the German fleet in late 1918 refused to sail for one last battle plus the scutteling of the German fleet is described well, but then the book abruptly ends. I would have liked to get some more reflection on the naval policy of both countries and how their naval campaings had been fought.

Martin Budd says

I was recommended this book by another Goodreads member following my review of "Dreadnought" and I'm so grateful that they did. If "Dreadnought" is a rich and satisfying read, and it is, then "Castles of Steel" is its measure and fulfilment.
Robert Massie has that rarest of gifts, the ability to communicate huge chunks of information, that could so easily be dry and repetitious and make it a gripping and richly enjoyable read. It is a very unusual gift to have a mind that grasps detail and technical information but also to have the insight into the motives and emotions of individuals and then communicate it in a relevant and inspiring way.
There are many fine reviews of this book on Goodreads that deal with the substance of the book, so I will not linger on the subject material, if you are already on this page my guess is you will know the key elements already. It's just wonderful to celebrate such a masterpiece of writing and enjoy the hard-work and craft of authors who give us such opportunities to be informed and enjoy their art.

Jonny Ruddock says

Telling the story of the Great War at sea is a massive undertaking, and Mr Massie does it very well. The account is very readable throughout, whether he is dealing with one of the sea battles or the political machinations occurring behind the scenes. One of the difficulties of this topic to my mind is that the climactic event if the sea war occurs roughly halfway through the timeline. Thankfully the narrative doesn't slacked on either side of this event. As with Dreadnought, wonderful pen portraits are provided of the main players, although reading of the earlier book is assumed for some individuals (notably Churchill). Less emphasis is given to the Imperial German side, but this doesn't detract from the book in any way.
I particularly liked the way that elements familiar to anyone who has a knowledge of World War Two at sea have their genesis. Here we see the start of naval aviation, workable submarine warfare although the battleship remains king.
A very good successor to Dreadnought, well written and eminently readable.

John says

One of the characteristics of examining the past is that otherwise mundane or ordinary aspects of life become romanticized. For example, travel on trains or steamers becomes more interesting than it almost certainly was to those that took advantage of such modes of transportation. Naval warfare is not exempt from this phenomenon. The rigorous skill of the crews and the intensity of yardarm-to-yardarm brawls during the Age of Sail cover up the general tedium, filth, and sheer terror during battle that life at sea held during that age. Likewise, the subjects of 'Castles of Steel' possess a elegance that is perhaps lost in a modern guided missile destroyer or nuclear submarine. These subjects, the giant turreted battleships of the Royal Navy and Imperial German Navy and the men that fought on them, were very much at home in the late-Victorian and Edwardian or Imperial eras in which they sailed and lived. Even while being made for battles at speeds exceeding 20 knots while firing shells the size of horses at ships 10 miles away, these technological wonders still relied on distinctly analog (or worse) techniques of aiming and firing and of communication. This is perhaps best demonstrated in while engaging German battles cruisers in a running battle in the North Sea in 1915, Admiral Sir David Beatty was unable to bag the lot because he could not signal his captains by flag the "Engage the enemy more closely" message that Nelson had sent his fleet at Trafalgar a hundred years prior, as it had been removed from the signal book. Such were the contradictions of war at sea during the First World War.

'Castles of Steel' is full of these contradictions and obstacles, as well as the successes that came through the mitigation of these forces. Under Robert Massie's excellent pen, the repeated clashes of the German and British fleets are vividly described, as are the politicking and strategizing that occurred behind the scenes at fleet headquarters, the halls of the Admiralty, and meetings of cabinets. Picking up where his book 'Dreadnought' ends, the same care that Massie took in describing the decades of declining relations between Britain and Germany is exerted in describing the 52 months of war at sea during World War One. The cast of characters is immense, and while the most famous—Winston Churchill, who served as First Lord of the Admiralty between 1911 and 1915—is amply covered, the rest are more than capably described as well. Crucially, Massie provides plenty of words on the commanders of the principle battle fleets on both sides: Jellicoe, Beatty, Hipper, and Scheer. These men and the fleets they commanded were the most important commanders at sea during the war; the former two were both responsible for a fleet that could have in one day lost the war for Britain. No other British commanders, not even French and Haig in France, bore such a burden. Such was the importance of Britain's "wooden walls," only now they were clad and armored in steel.

Every relevant action, from the initial chase of German battle cruisers in the Mediterranean at the onset of the war to the epic voyage and chase of Maximilian von Spee across the Pacific and South Atlantic during the same time, to the battle cruiser battles in the North Sea in 1915 and 1916 and the attempted naval storming of the Dardanelles, to the only clash of the entirety of both battle fleets during the war at Jutland and the eventual victory over the U-boats and the freeing of the lifeline to America is described. Massie's ability to clearly and succinctly describe naval warfare during the Age of Steam is impressive, and the actions he describes were very easy to follow. Likewise, his command of the subjects of naval strategy, naval architecture, the command structure of the two navies, and the biographical details of the major players was exemplary. His analysis, especially in one key area, was greatly appreciated.

This one area, the nature of command and leadership at sea during the age of naval artillery under steam power, was seen in the comparative qualities of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, and his one-time subordinate David Beatty. Jellicoe was named commander-in-chief of the Grand Fleet, the principle British battle fleet in home waters during the war, at the onset of the conflict. Beatty was the commander of Britain's battle cruisers, ships that possessed high speeds and the heavy guns of battleships, but lacked the protective armor

of the dreadnoughts. Jellicoe was methodical, brilliant, unassuming, and totally beloved. He had a firm grasp on the weight that lay upon his shoulders and the importance of the fleet he commanded. Beatty, due both in part to a meteoric rise through the ranks and decidedly cocksure attitude, was dashing, impetuous, and tenacious in a fight. Their different attitudes towards command were most evident at Jutland. Beatty's most important task as commander of the battle cruisers was to make sure Jellicoe's battleships were placed in the best position to annihilate their opposite numbers. When Beatty encountered his opposite number, Franz Hipper and his battle cruisers, off the coast of Denmark in June, 1916, he drove hard after them without maintaining the integrity of his force. He ran smack into the massed battleships of Reinhard Scheer's High Seas Fleet and lost three of his cruisers, but never relayed the proper information to Jellicoe. Beatty dutifully lured the German fleet into a trap laid by Jellicoe, but without the full picture Jellicoe was forced to rely upon his considerable instinct to best place his dreadnoughts to face the approaching German ships. Smart-sailing and fortunate weather allowed the vast majority of the High Seas Fleet to escape. In hindsight, Jellicoe could have destroyed this fleet, but his calculating mind prevented him from giving chase, as his chief concern was the survival of his battleships. After the battle he was excoriated for this decision, most viciously by Beatty, a man Jellicoe considered a friend. He never received the honor he deserved. While Beatty's Nelson-like tendency to engage whatever force was placed before him was praised, that Jellicoe had maintained Britain's command of the sea through his tactical awareness of the strategic picture was overlooked. Looking back, Jellicoe's command of his ships was virtually flawless given the circumstances.

In this respect, Massie's account is magnificent. The British and German fleets were essentially learning on the job about what their respective fighting capabilities were. British ships were generally faster and more heavily armed, but German gunnery, ship construction, and armor were superior. The chess match that developed from these relative advantages was a fascinating one, and in this work Robert Massie delivers an extremely lively and satisfying account. The central complaint is that Massie does jump around a bit within the story, and will tease future events in a manner that detracts from the drama and the building up of tension. This isn't a thriller, it is a work of military history, so he can be excused to a degree, but a more careful writer might be more sure to maintain the even flow of the events as they unfolded.

Bob H says

The logical sequel to Dreadnought, which chronicled the Anglo-German naval arms race, a proximate cause of WWI. Here, the navies built for such an unimaginable conflict now stalk each other, and although the book focuses on the British and German parts of the war it still is valuable for those interested in history or in vivid historical writing. Particularly valuable are the little-known but critical clashes outside Europe, notably the battles off Chile and Argentina that aren't well-remembered today -- Coronel and the Falklands -- but which were important at the time. (Indeed, Coronel was the first fleet action that Britain had lost in a century). Indeed, the end result of the naval war was the victory that the stalemated land war never achieved: the siege-by-sea that threatened both Britain and Germany with starvation, the latter breaking first, a collapse signaled by the German navy's revolt. The book does not neglect an important postscript: the post-war scuttling of the German fleet at the British naval base at Scapa Flow.

Very worthwhile.

Brian says

Robert Massie's approach to understanding World War I through the naval battles is original and thought provoking. It is one of the best he has ever written and the prefect accompaniment to his book Dreadnought. The book tracks how the German and British navies reacted during the war and the strategies employed by both. Whether it is the chasing of cruisers around South America or the battles between the Grand Fleet (Great Britain) and the High Seas Fleet (Germany) the detail and analysis is top notch. One of the more interesting side stories that Massie pursues is the invasion of the Turkish straights. This British naval disaster is captured perfectly by Massie and its overall importance in the war done well. Through his book you see a crystallization of British strategy that explains many of their actions in World War I as well as what will occur in World War II. Wireless telegraphy being new allows the First Sea Lord Winston Churchill to personally move ships which will become his method of operation in World War II.

The battle of Jutland is obviously a major focus of the book and done very well. The basic fleet movements are captured as well as the implications of strategy and the realities of command in World War I. The new development of Room 40 which was decoding German dispatches and relaying them to the British fleet proved pivotal over the course of the war. The British were not sure what to make of these initially and only used them sparingly. Following Jutland the book does an excellent job of showing how America was able to enter the war through the defeat of the German U-boats via the convoy. Overall the book is excellent and an amazing read for those who want to understand the aspects of naval warfare and World War I.

Melinda says

I have been listening to the book-on-CD of this, read masterfully by Richard Matthews. (his reading of Churchill is wonderful!) At 33 CD's, it is a long book. However, surprisingly to me, it is gripping reading (or listening). I have found myself learning with real anticipation about Admiral John Jellico, Admiral of the British Fleet during most of WW1; Admiral David Beatty, who led the 1st Battlecruiser Squadron under Jellicoe and then succeeded Jellicoe as Admiral of the British Fleet in 1919; Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty until 1916; David Lloyd George, Prime Minister after the fall of Asquith as PM.... and the list goes on. History lives!

I have enjoyed this book tremendously, and especially the quotes from letters and diaries which tells history in the words of those who lived it. I have a deeper appreciation of the desire for "noble warriors" among both the German and British Navy as they fought each other. Hampered by those in authority over them (the Kaiser in Germany's case, Churchill in Britain's case), the real men who fought and WERE THERE, impress me as none other.

Highly recommended.

Lee says

Unlike its predecessor - Dreadnought - this book zips along at a fast pace through the 4 years of war, plus the following few months of internment. The battle chapters, especially those concerning the Falkland Islands and Jutland, are intricately detailed. In between, during the long months of relative inaction, the activities of the various navies are told. Of particular significance is how close the unrestricted U-boat offensive came to winning the war.

Massie attempts to be neutral in judging the individual characters, unlike many past "historians". Jellicoe comes out very well, in particular in that every significant decision he made was correct, based on the information he had to hand.

A very good history.

Johnny says

This is a hefty volume, but it covers WWI naval history better than any I've read before. Robert K. Massey writes with more color and illuminates more character than Barbara Tuchman (*The First Salute* and *Guns of August*) such that the details behind and concerning the build-up to these engagements at sea and the engagements themselves read more like "story" than "history." Frankly, I read Alexander Fullerton's novel about the chase of the Goeben into the Dardanelles and on into the Black Sea, but even though it had a different angle, Massey's account seemed more lively and satisfying in the long run.

I've also never understood why the kaiser had such an inferiority complex until I read this account. Churchill is shown to be both brilliant and naive, resulting in exactly the kind of diverse consequences you'd expect from that combination. Churchill's struggles to get the Chancellor of the Exchequer to loosen the purse strings in the build-up to WWI certainly casts the struggles described in his memoirs on WWII's build-up (*The Gathering Storm*) into intriguing relief. Also, how could I possibly not like a book that regularly reflects on the work of Jackie Fisher in creating the modern British navy (at that time) and often quotes from the great admiral's acerbic observations about command fitness with regard to naval officers who are merely part of the old boys' network.

It was incredibly interesting to read about the post-Jutland controversy with regard to Jellicoe's actions versus Beatty's. Beatty's carelessness seems to have cost an opportunity for Jutland to be a more decisive action as did Jellicoe's cautiousness. Certainly, Massie's account is no friend to Beatty.

Of course, Churchill doesn't fare too well at Massie's hand either. Churchill's ham-handed telegraphy when serving in the admiralty probably cost a lot of men their lives when he insisted that the old aging hulk known as Canopus was sufficient to respond to a request for reinforcement.

Most importantly, I had no clue that, in spite of the Armistice in November of 1918, there were more German casualties in June of 1919 when the crews of the surrendered German vessels scuttled them in Scapa Flow and tried to evacuate. Fascinating!

Veeral says

One of Robert Massie’s books concludes with the line **“When the last stroke fell, Great Britain was at war with Germany.”**

Another one of his books ends with the sentence **“The Great War was over.”**

What lies between these two lines is an unparalleled work (more than 800 pages long) of history about the war at sea between Britain and Germany in the Great War. That book is Castles of Steel.

“Castles of Steel” is the sequel to Robert Massie’s 1000 page mammoth Dreadnought which chronicles the national rivalries (between Britain and Germany) that led to the first great arms race and eventually to the First World War. “Dreadnought” ends with Britain’s declaration of war on Germany.

I started with “Dreadnought” and when I was about 100 pages in; I stopped and started reading “Castles of Steel” instead. Don’t get me wrong, “Dreadnought” is not bad. In fact, it’s a great work; and its greatness is what led me to stop reading it and start “Castles of Steel”. I just couldn’t stop myself.

But that’s one of the many benefits of reading history. You can either read it in chronological order, or if you want, you can read it in any damn order you like. Sure, reading in chronological order helps to understand the events more clearly, but even cursory knowledge of previous events would be enough to take you through the rest. That’s why I decided to read “Castles of Steel” before “Dreadnought”.

At the start of The Great War, fleet strategies still revolved around the three “Mahanian dogmas” - the cult of the big gun battleship, the iron rule of concentration, and the annihilation of the enemy fleet in a single decisive battle. It was put forth by Alfred Thayer Mahan, the American naval officer–turned–historian in his first major work, The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1805 which was published in 1890-1892.

In addition to this, the British public was still infatuated with the dream that the feat of Admiral Lord Nelson and his heroic victory in the Battle of Trafalgar would be repeated, where the British sunk 22 French and Spanish ships without losing a single battleship. The press and public alike were waiting for their next Trafalgar in The Great War. But it never came. The technology had improved leaps and bounds since that legendary battle and had changed all the rules of engagement. The transition from old tactics to the newer ones was gradual, which did come eventually, but not even at the end of The Great War. (Only with the sinking of “Repulse” and “Prince of Wales” in World War-II by Japanese airplanes, the era of battleship came to an end.)

The German navy began the war with three principal codes. The decisive advantage that the British had over their German counterparts was that that they were in possession of all three within four months of the war. By the end of the war, Room 40 (code-breaking unit) at the British Admiralty had eventually decoded 20,000 German naval wireless messages.

Without breaking the German codes, the battles of Dogger Bank and Jutland would not have been fought. Nor, later, would the U-boats have been defeated as the British had no other way of knowing to be at the right place at the right time. Curiously enough, the Germans never doubted that their codes were compromised even though the ships of British Grand Fleet suspiciously arrived every time with greater forces whenever the ships of German High Seas Fleet went on a raiding mission.

Massie does a great job of describing all the major players of the war and among those, he does not spare Winston Churchill (who was First Lord of the British Navy in World War-I for some time) whom he describes as overzealous and often arrogant and who did not have the first-hand knowledge of naval tactics (as he was a politician, not a seaman) compared to the likes of Lord Fischer, Jellicoe and Beatty but who repeatedly put forth his own battle plans and tactics for the Grand Fleet, which often wrought disastrous results.

Churchill confiscated two Turkish battleships (which were being constructed in Britain for Turkey at the start of the war) by saying, “We could not afford to do without these two fine ships.” But when the Turkish acquired the German battle cruiser ‘Goeben’ which found a safe haven in Turkish waters while being chased by the British ships through the Mediterranean Sea, Churchill rumbled that Turkey’s behavior in the

acquisition of the ‘Goeben’ (and ‘Breslau’) was “insolent,” “defiant,” and “openly fraudulent.”

Churchill’s war as The First Lord came to an end with the debacle at Dardanelles where he proposed to destroy the Turkish shore guns with the British fleet. Effective shore bombardment from the ships was considered impossible at that time. And with good reasons. The gunners of the ship could not correct their aim while firing on land for the lack of water spray which sprouts whenever a shell hits the sea water which could be used as a reference point.

So, even though Fischer opposed the attack on Dardanelles, it was proposed to land an army on Gallipoli. Hence, the front was stalemated yet again in a trench war. The Allies could not seize the ridges; the Turks could not hurl their enemies back into the sea; and the killing ground of the Western Front was reproduced at Gallipoli. The offensive eventually ended, along with Churchill’s and Fisher’s posts.

While Massie makes fun of Churchill, he praises Jellicoe as a consummate professional, calm, deliberate, and meticulous, with a thorough mastery of his ships and guns, acquired over a long career afloat and ashore.

On the other hand, Massie describes Beatty as brave, but high-strung and impatient for action. Beatty’s career had advanced in fits and starts. Brilliant performance under fire had led to rapid promotions, leapfrogging him over his contemporaries—but then he had held himself back by his own unorthodox and arrogant behavior. Moreover, Beatty had a troubled married life and also an extra marital affair, some details of which Massie describes shamelessly.

While his extra marital affair was in full swing, Beatty wrote and send some poetry to his lover, which Massie did not fail (with some glee, I suppose) to include in his book.

Here’s to you and here’s to Blighty,
I’m in pajamas, you in a nighty,
If we are feeling extra flighty,
Why in pajamas and Why the nighty?

Well, whether Beatty was the hero of Jutland or not is still debatable (Massie thinks he was not); everyone could agree that he was no poet.

The Great War was peculiar in many ways. New technology was often ridiculed. But nothing seemed more contemptible and hilarious to the oldies of Royal Navy than the submarines.

Submarines were still referred as “playthings” at the start of The Great War and some considered it “ungentlemanly” to sink a ship with a submarine as it remained hidden until the very last moment (The submarines in World War-I had to resurface in order to fire their torpedoes).

No one at the start took submarines seriously. Some of the “tactics” (I am not going to call it ASW) that Royal Navy strategists came up with to “fight” German submarines were extremely ridiculous.

Tactic 1: A few motor launches carried two swimmers, one armed with a black bag, the other with a hammer. If a periscope was sighted, the launch was to come as close as possible. The swimmers were to dive in and one man would attempt to place his black bag over the periscope; if he failed, the other would try to smash the glass with his hammer.

Tactic 2: Attempting to teach seagulls to defecate on periscopes.

My only gripe with this book is that Massie failed to mention the name of the genius who came up with the idea of teaching seagulls to defecate on periscopes.

But ridiculed as they were, U-boats did have a major impact on the war. During fifty-one months of war, German submarines sunk a total of 5,282 British, Allied, and neutral merchant ships totaling 11,153,000 tons at the cost of 178 U-boats and 511 officers and 4,576 men. Three hundred and ninety-two submarines had been built before and during the war; therefore, the loss rate was almost 50 percent. At the time of the armistice, the German navy still possessed 194 U-boats, with a further 149 under construction.

The surface boats never had such an impact on the war, although one early major victory for the British came at the Battle of the Falkland Islands where they sunk all the German ships. But that feat was never repeated.

But as this was the first war after major technological innovations, there were numerous accounts of "firsts" which might seem routine and boring to us today.

For example, The Cuxhaven Raid was history's first aircraft-carrier-based air strike. It was also the first naval battle in which, on both sides, the striking forces were made up exclusively of aerial machines.

In Cuxhaven Raid, 150 British warships were to be employed to deliver to the German mainland exactly 81.50 pounds (weight, not the currency) of explosives. This was the combined weight of the bursting charges in the 27 bombs to be carried by the seaplanes.

As expected, hilarity ensued.

Almost simultaneously, ten miles nearer the coast, another seaplane had landed alongside the destroyer Lurcher, from which Keyes was supervising his submarines. The pilot taxied up to the destroyer, shouted that he had only five minutes' worth of fuel remaining, and asked the direction to the carriers. Realizing that the rendezvous was too far off, Keyes invited the pilot to come on board and took the seaplane in tow.

Here's another one.

Casting off the towline, he maneuvered so close to one of the newly arrived seaplanes that the pilot and observer were able to step directly onto the submarine's deck; he told the two airmen in the other plane to swim to his boat.

Yes, you read that right. They actually stepped off an airplane directly onto a submarine, without even wetting their shoes. The other two were wussies, they had to swim for it.

One of the other major naval engagements of the Great War was the Battle of Dogger Bank. But as Room 40 already had the codes, the British knew Admiral Hipper was coming even before his ships left harbor. The result was that as Hipper's ships departed, British warships were weighing anchor and heading for the Dogger Bank. Germany lost her battle cruiser 'Blücher' while the rest made it to port with more or less damage.

Although all these flavorless poking battles were followed enthusiastically by the people in both countries, the British were still waiting for their Nelson, whether he arrived in the form of Jellicoe or Beatty. On 31st May 1916, it seemed that the British's Trafalgar had finally arrived at Jutland.

150 British ships were pitted against 99 of the Germans. Once again, Room 40 made it possible.

After much poking and thrusting, Britain lost 14 ships (3 battle cruisers, 3 armored cruisers, and 8 destroyers), while the German navy lost 11 (1 battle cruiser, 1 predreadnought battleship, 4 light cruisers, and 5 destroyers). British casualties were much heavier: 6,768 men were killed or wounded, while the Imperial Navy lost 3,058.

Battleships lost on either side: 0.

But the fact remained that the superior British fleet still ruled the North Sea and that was enough to cripple Germany's international trade in the Great War.

So, although one can surmise from the figures that the Germans had an upper hand at Jutland, the status quo remained unchanged.

It was put aptly by a New York City newspaper: **"The German fleet has assaulted its jailor, but it is still in jail."**

Finally the Great War ended, leaving the British relieved, the Germans chagrined but content, and the French furious.

The Germans scuttled their fleet at Scapa Flow so as not to let the victors enjoy their spoils of victory. The British were relieved as they didn't need any additional firepower and at last the second best navy in the world was totally destroyed. The Germans were content as they denied the victors their spoils. The French, on the other hand, were furious, as they were eagerly waiting to seize some excellent German ships for their own navy, but the scuttling spoiled their plans. No wonder the Versailles treaty came into being.

Matt says

The thing about World War I that most sparks my imagination is its occurrence at a unique point in history, where the pre-modern technologies of the 19th century entwined with the familiar, modern technologies of the 20th. The result was quaint and disastrous and fascinating to behold. British officers still armed themselves with swagger sticks, important towns were still fortified, and the cavalry remained an important military branch. Meanwhile, poison gas, airplanes, high-powered artillery (and later, tanks), and machine guns were rendering moot centuries' worth of collected military wisdom.

There is a learning curve with all new technologies. It takes time to figure out how they work; what tweaks are needed; and what must be done to make them most efficient. Unfortunately, in war, the learning curve is measured by a body count. The leaders in World War I were 19th century men, incapable, at first, of jettisoning all they'd learned in order to reevaluate their tactics to the new machinery and weaponry at their disposal. While it has always been fashionable (and often warranted) to decry the generalship in World War I (especially from the *Entente* commanders), it is hardly fair to hold men such as Haig and Joffre to the visionary standards of Steve Jobs.

The lack of technological vision in World War I is most viscerally seen in the trenches, with massed frontal assaults against elaborate trench-works and automatic weapons. But it was also quite evident in the war at sea. In the years preceding 1914, millions of dollars (or pounds or deutschmarks) were spent making incredibly sophisticated warships that would soon be rendered obsolete by a competing technology, the airplane.

The focus of the early 20th century arms race was the dreadnought, a revolutionary all-big-gun battleship. At the time, dreadnoughts loomed as large as nuclear weapons in our own day. Dreadnoughts became so important to navies that they were loathe to be risked. As with the aforementioned nuclear weapons, the dreadnoughts great advantage was in its threat, rather than its reality. (This was made especially true due to the lack of precision gunnery).

Robert Massie's *Castles of Steel* is a naval history of World War I, and a sequel to Massie's *Dreadnought*, which recounted the naval arms race between England and Germany leading into (if not necessarily causing) the Great War. *Castles of Steel* tells the sometimes-thrilling, often anti-climatic story of the war away from the trenches, the shell-torn fields, and the gas-despoiled landscapes of the Eastern and Western Fronts.

When it comes to writing popular narrative histories, Massie can hardly be beat. Every one of his books, from *Nicholas and Alexandra* to *Peter the Great* to this, I count among my all-time favorites. As an empathetic biographer, a chronicler of lives who wants the reader to *feel* for historical figures, and not just know the important dates, Massie has only Robert Caro as a peer.

To be sure, Massie has his detractors, especially from academic historians. He doesn't do original research. As far as I know, he doesn't speak any foreign languages. Admittedly, he stands on the shoulders of others. Of course, academic historians mainly don't like him because he sells books. Like Edmund Morris and David McCullough, he is an inveterate studier, master synthesizer, and gorgeous writer. He tends towards the Great Man theory of history; while that has long been out of style, it certainly makes for engaging books.

After devoting a chapter to setting the stage, Massie kicks things off with a retelling of the first naval action of World War I, the escape of the German battle-cruiser *Goeben* and the light-cruiser *Breslau*. At the outbreak of war, these two ships were patrolling in the Mediterranean. Upon learning they were at war with France, both ships engaged in some desultory shelling of Algerian port-cities. Then they broke for Constantinople with the British Navy hot on their heels. Eventually, both ships found refuge in the Ottoman Empire. To skirt neutrality requirements, the ships were handed over to the Turks, renamed, and the German crews given fezzes (one can only imagine how that was received).

Other sea battles follow, some famous, some forgotten: the Battle of the Bight; Coronel; the Scarborough Raid; the Dogger Bank; Gallipoli; and the modern Trafalgar of Jutland.

Without disrupting the narrative, Massie devotes a lot of time to developing his theses that World War I was won and lost on the high seas, namely the English Channel. Massie has an unassailable point; however, the importance of the seas was in the supply lines; and the threat to the supply lines was not settled by the Grand Fleet verses the High Seas Fleet, but in submarines, blockades, and mines.

Massie does not neglect this reality. He gives his due to these "unchivalrous" modes of warfare. He also devotes space to Britain's less-effective blockade of Germany, and to the effect that the sinking of the *Lusitania* had on America's professed neutrality.

> At the end, as *Lusitania*'s bow plunged toward the granite seafloor 300 feet below, the liner's stern rose high in the air; at this angle, guy wires snapped and towering seventy-eight-foot funnels and even taller wireless masts toppled onto the decks. Rumbling internal explosions of steam hurled debris, bodies, and huge bubbles of water into the air. When the clouds of steam had cleared, *Lusitania* was gone. Since the torpedo struck, eighteen minutes had passed. Only six of the liner's forty-eight lifeboats floated amid the wreckage, and hundreds of men and

> women were struggling individually in the calm, green, sunlit sea. A ships junior officer swimming through the wreckage found himself listening to the cries of infants floating nearby in their wicker baskets. There was nothing he could do. Gradually, the baskets sank.

Even though subs and mines played the preeminent role in the war at sea, they don't necessarily make for the most evocative narrative. For example, a book devoted solely to mines would probably go something like this: *"The mine sat there. And sat there. And sat there. And…sat there. A fish swam by. The mine continued to sit there. And sit there. And sit there. Next to the mine, an octopus humped a whale. The mine did nothing. It just sat there. And sat. And sat."*

Consequentially, a lot of detail is poured into small, inconsequential naval actions, in which England's Grand Fleet and Germany's High Seas Fleet sparred and poked and prodded, but never really got into a full-on engagement. This can be a little frustrating. In some ways, it's the wartime equivalent of a high school romance with a Catholic girl: some necking, a little heavy petting, and perhaps a breathless promise or two, but never anything more.

The chief selling point of *Castles of Steel* is the finely wrought characters. Massie is fixated on the humanity of the likes of Churchill and Jellicoe and Speer. By far, the star of the show is Admiral David Beatty:

> Beatty's aura radiated in part from his genuine accomplishments and in part from successful exhibitionism. He was short and trim, easy to miss in a crowd, until he made himself instantly recognizable on board ship and in photographs by turning himself into a seagoing dandy. He tilted his famous extra-wide-brimmed cap over his eyes at a jaunty, devil-may-care angle; he stuck his thumbs rakishly into the pockets of his blue uniform jacket, which his tailor had been instructed to make with six brass buttons instead of the regulation eight. Like other flamboyantly egotistical and successful warriors…Beatty used visual imagery to capture popular fancy.
>
> Behind the imagery in Beatty's case lay a brilliant, frequently controversial career – and a life of private pain. A hero of colonial wars in the Sudan and China, twice promoted far ahead of other men his age, Beatty had attempted to mesh his naval career with marriage to a wealthy woman and, at her insistence, to present himself as a man of fashion in hunting circles and London society. Over the years, this effort took a heavy toll. Sometimes on the bridge of his flagship, Beatty would release his inner tension by making faces. "For no apparent reason," said an officer who served with him, "he would screw his face into a fearsome grimace and hold it quite unconsciously for a minute or two."

I don't want to oversell things too much by saying that Massie's chapter on Beatty, including Beatty's troubled marriage to Ethel Tree (daughter of department store magnate Marshall Field), is worth the cover price.

The only downside to *Castles of Steel* has nothing to do with the book. Rather, it's the reality of history. In *Dreadnought*, we learned the laborious process by which England and Germany created these massive fleets of huge, powerful, well-armed, well-armored battleships. In *Castles of Steel*, we learn that once these two nations had their shiny, happy ships afloat, they weren't in a hurry to see them blasted apart and sent to the

bottom of the ocean.

Throughout the narrative, we are teased with the prospect of one titanic battle. And finally, to an extent, it arrived, in the form of Jutland, a now-mythical meeting between John Jellico, David Beatty and the Grand Fleet for Great Britain, and Franz von Hipper, Reinhard Scheer and the High Seas Fleet for Germany.

In a sense, Jutland lives up to expectations. It was the last major engagement between battleships in history. It was also one of the largest naval battles in history, though it would be dwarfed by battles such as Leyte Gulf in the next war, which relied heavily on aircraft carriers and airplanes. Certainly, it was a big fight, with 28 battleships for England engaging 16 battleships for Germany.

However, after reading Massie's extraordinary account, I was left feeling: "That's it? *That's* the greatest naval battle in history?"

The reality of Jutland is not nearly as entertaining as its myth. It wasn't a well-fought heavyweight match; it was a series of blunders and mistakes, laying waste to Germany's best-laid plans: Beatty was drawn into an ambush, which was sprung too soon; Beatty got touched-up, but escaped; the German Fleet pursues, only to run into Jellicoe's van; there was a fight; the English take the brunt of things, but the German's run; Jellicoe doesn't pursue; Beatty criticizes Jellicoe even though he was the one who made the initial, near-fatal blunders. End of story.

No battleships were sunk in the making of this epic battle.

In the end, the titular "castles of steel" failed to live up to their billing. They never get to unleash the powerful punches for which they'd been designed. Their existence served mainly to shuttle innovation towards other channels (such as submarines). Indeed, only a handful of dreadnoughts were lost during the war, and these losses came about due to torpedoes or grounding. None were sunk by naval gunfire.

At the end of the war, the Germans scuttled their great fleet in Scapa Flow, to deny their ships to Great Britain. The lasting testament to Massie's book is that I actually felt a twinge of sadness when these proud leviathans settled onto the ocean floor without ever having faced the ultimate test.

Richard Thomas says

Thorough account.

This is a very good account of the naval war between Britain and Germany. The depth to which Robert Massie goes in analysing the strengths and weaknesses of both navies is astounding. As well as being excellent history, the book is elegantly written with a plethora of insights into the minds of the lords of both fleets. I can't really praise it too highly. On a minor note, the book refers to possible submarine incursions into Scapa Flow. There is a reef called the Barrel of Butter which looks remarkably like a submarine at some stages of the tide and was shelled by nervous naval gunners. But this is an invaluable history of the times which doesn't shrink from judgment of the shortcomings of both hierarchies,notably Beatty and Churchill.

Garick Black says

Massie has quickly become one of my favorite writers. His blend of technical detail with the human drive really appeals to me. For an American, Massie tells the story the way a European would. There is no quick exposition or future telling of future American glory. Massie understands both the German and British mindset before and during the war. He does not condemn the Germans for being the 'bad guys'. He does point out more flaws in the German thinking than the British, but that can also be attributed to who won the war.
Massie holds Jellicoe in high regard. Jellicoe is the only admiral who has his mistakes defended and a sizable portion of the post Jutland account in Castles of Steel is spent illustrating how the defensive posture of the Grand Fleet was the best choice for the war. He has a much lower opinion of Beatty, Massie holds Hiddenburgh and Ludendorff responsible for the downfall of the German Empire. In particular, Ludendorff is made a fool out of and is the only German who is implicitly connected to Hitler by Massie in this book. These judgements are not wrong, but do seem to carry more emphasis to Massie than other prominent leaders.
This is one of the best and most rounded books I have read that deals with WWI. I firmly recommend this.

Jill Hutchinson says

This is a "must read" if you are a Massie fan, a student of WWI history or interested in the developing stages of modern sea power. This is a wonderful narrative of the war at sea between the Grand Fleet of Great Britain and the High Seas Fleet of Imperial Germany. Massie weaves a fascinating tale of the tug-of-war between the politicians and the naval commanders on one side, and the power of the Kaiser over the Navy on the other.
Massie gives interesting insights into the personal and professional lives of the major players in the drama and pulls no punches in his critcism of many of the decisions made which cost the lives of valiant mariners. Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, is cast in a negative light and apparently with good reason as some of his major decisions are suspect. Many of the myths of the major battles at sea are put to rest, such as the Battle of Jutland, in which both sides declared victory. This is 700+ page book and there are sections where battles are described in infinite detail which make it a somewhat slow read. But, overall, this is a magnificent telling of an important period in world history. Massie's "Dreadnought" is a good preface to this book and should be read first.
