



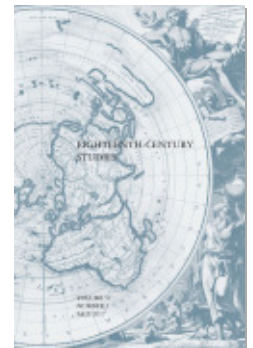
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*British Expeditionary Warfare and the Defeat of Napoleon,
1793–1815* by Robert K. Sutcliffe (review)

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Robert K. Sutcliffe, *British Expeditionary Warfare and the Defeat of Napoleon, 1793–1815* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2016). Pp. 294. \$120.00.

Based on a doctoral dissertation, Robert K. Sutcliffe's study is a detailed examination of the processes by which Britain sought to initiate and then to improve its conducting of amphibious expeditions in order to defeat Napoleonic France. As a study of the difficult task of transporting and supplying large forces overseas, this book also serves as a guide to the operation of the British military state and economy within a technological context that was totally different from that of the steam age, let alone the enhanced technologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is much here as well on improvements in army-navy cooperation, including during the War of 1812.

In spite of creating major issues for coordination, such cooperation repeatedly proved to be a key tactical advantage. Many of the British army and naval commanders had relevant personal experience from recent years, while the value of accumulated knowledge had been reflected by the publication in 1780 of a second edition of James Wolfe's *Instructions to Young Officers*. Experience, however, did not necessarily mean success. Indeed, there was a series of British failures, including at Toulon (1793), Ostend (1798), in Holland (1799), and at Belle Isle, Ferrol, and Cadiz (1800). The reasons for failure throw much light on the difficulties attending joint operations. At Toulon a British fleet supported local Royalists, but, as Washington had done at Boston in March 1776, Napoleon used artillery to make the harbor untenable and force the British warships to leave. In 1798, a raid was mounted on Ostend in order to destroy the lock gates of the Bruges canal and make it harder for the French to use the canal system for invasion preparations. (This anticipated what the British were to do in order to block submarine operations when the Germans held the area in 1918.) One thousand, three hundred troops disembarked and cut the sluices at Ostend, but a strong wind prevented the ships from coming in to allow the troops to re-embark, French reinforcements arrived, and the British were forced to surrender. These failures were balanced by successes for British combined operations, including the 1798 capture of Minorca, an important target due to its potential as a naval base.

Ultimately, however, none of these successes and failures were of key significance for the war. Instead, the other powers of the coalition against France were defeated on land; Austria, crucially, made peace with France in 1797, leaving Britain isolated. So also with the War of the Second Coalition, although again Britain made major use of combined operations. The most important of these in Europe was an attack on the Low Countries in 1799, designed in cooperation with a Russian force. Launched against the northern coast of Holland, this attack was intended to seize the Dutch fleet, a key element in the naval balance, thereby encouraging an uprising against the pro-French Batavian Republic and in favor of the pro-British exiled House of Orange. The expedition was mismanaged; more to the point (for many expeditions were mismanaged), it was unsuccessful. The goal was unclear and the necessary planning had not been carried out: too little was known about the terrain, the opposing forces, and the attitude of the population, and much of the available information was inaccurate. Moreover, the French were expecting an attack.

In Europe itself more than in the European transoceanic world, British combined operations were very dependent on the overall diplomatic and military situation. In particular, France's ability to force the Dutch and Spain into alliance left Britain isolated among Atlantic naval powers, while the danger of invasion from France increased markedly. It was to counter the latter threat that Britain launched its disastrous Walcheren expedition in 1809.

Sutcliffe is especially discerning on the nature of tradeoffs, emphasizing that of economy versus efficiency. Moreover, there are the problems of administrative structure and process. For example, the role of the Transport Board in planning was inadequate because Secretaries of State for War did not consult it before major Cabinet decisions were taken. Nevertheless, once preparations were in progress, there were frequent meetings. Sutcliffe argues that Castlereagh clearly understood the difficulties inherent in the transport procurement process. Nevertheless, as Sutcliffe demonstrates, the impact of the weather and the inability of all the departments involved to perform in harmony during the preparation phase were often underestimated. The lack of information on future requirements ensured that the Board was generally reluctant to make decisions relating to the discharge of ships without first checking.

Considerable attention is devoted to operations in the Peninsula and to the Walcheren expedition. Sutcliffe argues that the Transport Board performed very well during the latter and in the withdrawal from Corunna. For example, the Board skillfully used the price mechanism to attract ships, refusing to pay an overly-high rate. The transport agents on station incurred criticisms, but Sutcliffe is sympathetic to the Board, noting the problems of maintaining ships on station.

While *British Expeditionary Warfare* is not an easy read, it amply fulfills the need for an effective administrative history of this important topic.