

British naval race a satisfying read:[Final Edition]

Mary Hemmings, Freelance writer. Calgary Herald. Calgary, Alta.:Jul 11, 1992. p. A18

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## **Abstract (Summary)**

[Robert K. Massie] alternates among characterizations, technical developments and political situations to produce a tapestry of an era. In addition to being a seductive biographer and an excellent historian, Massie writes very fat books, literary equivalents of an Edwardian meal - overwhelming, yet very satisfying.

Fuelled by the kaiser`s intense jealousy of British naval power, the German navy was propelled into a frenzy of shipbuilding. British politicians and the press were mildly alarmed but the navy remained chauvinistic and bureaucratic. Promotions and rewards went to captains who had the shiniest brasswork and hyphenated names. It was only with the appointment of Admiral John Fisher in the 1870s that the fleet was subject to substantial upgrade.

## **Full Text**

(454 words)

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DREADNOUGHT: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War, by Robert K. Massie (Random House, 1007 pages, \$46.50).

With Dreadnought, Pulitzer Prize-winner Robert K. Massie has produced another historical epic to share the shelves with his Nicholas and Alexandra and Peter the Great.

Dreadnought is a panoramic history of Great Britain`s race to achieve naval superiority in the decades leading up to the First World War. As a class of battleship, the Dreadnought was an icon in the arms race. How and why Britain reached this milestone is the subject of this story.

In the years before the war, Great Britain abandoned its policy of "splendid isolationism." It was dragged into the 20th century by Germany`s petulant and bellicose Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Throughout the period an army of diplomats spun webs of fragile alliances, while spies flitted among dockyards and embassies. Royalty occasionally gummed up the works with family reunions and squabbles.

The era's colonial expansion was more than a drive for resources and status. Colonies ensured trade routes. In a world dependant on the sea for economic growth, the "have-nots" were those without overseas ports and the most notable have-not was Germany.

Determined in the 1870s to secure outposts, Germany's Admiral von Tirpitz successfully expanded the navy through legislation, taxation and bullying.

Fuelled by the kaiser's intense jealousy of British naval power, the German navy was propelled into a frenzy of shipbuilding. British politicians and the press were mildly alarmed but the navy remained chauvinistic and bureaucratic. Promotions and rewards went to captains who had the shiniest brasswork and hyphenated names. It was only with the appointment of Admiral John Fisher in the 1870s that the fleet was subject to substantial upgrade.

The naval establishment resisted modernization but Fisher's hard-won friendship with the royal family assured his success.

The decades that followed were turbulent and uncertain. Colonial skirmishes threatened to explode into major European catastrophes. With each subsiding crisis, a new set of armaments and alliances materialized and led toward the catastrophic war years 1914-18.

Massie's strength is his ability to characterize people. Physical traits, nervous habits, annoying mannerisms and favorite expressions are woven into fascinating sketches of major historical figures. Lord Kitchener's encounter with the French captain Marchand over a disputed fort on the Nile is illustrative of an era when manners were an element in the art of war.

Massie alternates among characterizations, technical developments and political situations to produce a tapestry of an era. In addition to being a seductive biographer and an excellent historian, Massie writes very fat books, literary equivalents of an Edwardian meal - overwhelming, yet very satisfying.

(Hemmings is a book reviewer for Library Journal and a librarian at the University of Calgary's Law Library.)