

Abstract (Summary)

[Hector C. Bywater]'s books transcended the absurdity of most such works. It was taken seriously enough by the Japanese Naval Command and Isoroku Yamamoto to serve as mandatory reading for young naval officers. Even the U.S. Navy was sufficiently impressed to revise its "War Plan Orange" to reflect Bywater's staged advance scenario in the Pacific.

Bywater was born in London on the 79th anniversary of the Trafalger victory. Ships were his passion. As his family shifted roots from England to Germany and then to Brooklyn, young Bywater's international background allowed him to serve as a British spy in both German naval cities and New York shipyards.

Full Text

(368 words)

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VISIONS OF INFAMY: The untold story of how journalist Hector C. Bywater devised the plans that led to Pearl Harbor (St. Martin's Press, 346 pages, \$29.95).

In the decades before Pearl Harbor, Hector C. Bywater wrote *Sea Power in the Pacific* and *The Great Pacific War* as an exercise in military sci-fi. As a familiar literary genre, these "guerres imaginaires" provoked speculative war-gaming among military experts.

But Bywater's books transcended the absurdity of most such works. It was taken seriously enough by the Japanese Naval Command and Isoroku Yamamoto to serve as mandatory reading for young naval officers. Even the U.S. Navy was sufficiently impressed to revise its "War Plan Orange" to reflect Bywater's staged advance scenario in the Pacific.

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His encyclopedic knowledge of ships and munitions continued to serve him in post-war years as he became a "Fleet Street" journalist. His contacts and his global insights propelled him to new fame as he rubbed elbows with the likes of Frederick Jane (*Jane's Fighting Ships*).

Bywater's books had a Cassandra-like quality based on a solid understanding of modern weapons, tactics and national goals. He clearly understood the significance of the Yap Islands (the Midway) and predicted a Japanese offensive reminiscent of Pearl Harbor. Although his observations about battleship warfare and air power proved wrong, his books show that he had a firm understanding of military strategy.

He died suddenly in 1940 at the age of 55. Was it alcoholic poisoning due to the cumulative effects of British naval pink gins? Or was it, as Honan suggests, a jab of strychnine favored by Japanese operatives at the time? Certainly Yamamoto had reason to eliminate the prophetic voice of a British spy.

It's a compelling premise. Despite Honan's somewhat lifeless treatment, it's a fascinating story about a spy who became a writer.

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

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