

## Book Reviews

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**Andrew Lambert.** *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy.* New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-300-25073-2. Pp. 533. Hardcover: £25.00/ \$35.00.

Julian Corbett (1854-1922) was a great thinker of maritime affairs. Together with Alfred Thayer Mahan, he is arguably the only classical thinker in the field. Both were part of that golden age of maritime thinking that came to the fore some decades prior to World War I. Just like Carl von Clausewitz has influenced military theorists all around the world ever since the publication of *On War*, Corbett and Mahan are indispensable points of reference for any scholar wishing to comprehend the political and military uses of maritime forces.

Corbett, a trained lawyer turned professional historian, was a master of moulding strategic theory and maritime history, creating the most succinct theory of maritime strategy ever put on paper. Like no other he managed to absorb Clausewitzian theory to harness his in-depth knowledge of the primary sources of British maritime history, from Drake to Nelson to Jellicoe. It is this marriage of solid theory and historical insight that made Corbett such a profound thinker of maritime strategy. This is also why his acclaimed book *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911) is still widely read in universities and naval colleges around the world.

Among other things, Corbett provided the blueprint to the idea of a British way of war: the manner in which a powerful fleet with command of the sea, coupled with mobile amphibious forces, foreign alliances, and economic pressure on opponents, could serve as a successful model for conducting war. This way of war was later popularised by Basil Liddell Hart, but the ideas certainly originated with Corbett. It is debatable whether (and to what extent) this specific form of warfare is applicable to other actors not blessed with the geostrategic benefits inherited by Great Britain. Most people could probably argue that some aspects are important also to smaller and more land-oriented powers.

Professor Lambert's biography on Corbett is an invaluable contribution to the field. It is superior in many ways to the only other book-size biography available, written by Donald Schurman.<sup>1</sup> Lambert's sources

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<sup>1</sup> Donald M. Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922: Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1981).

are richer, his arguments more incisive, and his knowledge of Corbett and the historical context greater. Having myself attempted an assessment of Corbett's theory of maritime strategy about ten years ago,<sup>2</sup> I sincerely regret the fact that this book was not available when I conducted my study of Corbett's theoretical contribution. This would certainly have helped me to put his theoretical work better into historical context.

As to the focus and lay-out of the book, Lambert dives deep into the life and times of Corbett, analysing his development as a thinker, his relationships with individuals of power and influence, as well as his work to promote a maritime strategy within the political stratum and the armed forces. Lambert uses a roughly chronological structure in which each chapter focuses on important works and contributions by Corbett, for example his teaching at the Naval War Course, books such as *England in the Mediterranean*, *England in the Seven Years' War* and *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, pamphlets on international law, and the official history of naval operations during World War I. He often subjects previous scholars of Corbett, and British maritime historians dealing with the period, to criticism and their failure to correctly appreciate the role played by Corbett. Notable targets are the aforementioned Schurman and British historian Alfred J. Marder.

What then does Lambert add to our knowledge of Corbett? First of all, he provides a wealth of new detail, and a better understanding of Corbett's life, achievements, and influence. This is done by means of his impressive command of the primary sources and previous research in the field, but also his deep knowledge of British maritime history from the sixteenth century onwards. Secondly, and better than anyone previously, Lambert lays out the degree to which Corbett's books, articles, and pamphlets on maritime affairs were part of a contemporary debate about British doctrine in the wake of World War I and its aftermath. In this, Corbett turned his analytical mind against Mahanists in the Royal Navy, and Continentalists in the Royal Army and beyond. Anybody who has studied Corbett, his work, and the historical context in which he operated, could of course sense this contemporary streak in his writing, but Lambert fleshes it out in a superior, meticulous, and convincing manner. Finally, Lambert spells out the close kinship between Basil Liddell Hart and Julian Corbett in regard to a British way of war. In this, he lays out in detail the great debt of the former to the latter.

If any criticism could be leveled at such a great undertaking, it would be that at times Lambert tends to get a bit lost in his narratives and details, which risks clouding the broad strokes and overall assessment of Corbett and his contribution. This is a minor problem, however, and rarely impedes the general argument.

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<sup>2</sup> J. J. Widen, Widen, J. J., *Theorist of Maritime Strategy: Sir Julian Corbett and his Contribution to Military and Naval Thought* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012). A paperback-version was released by Routledge in 2015.

There is little doubt in my mind that no historian alive today could have done a better job than Lambert to assess Corbett's contribution to British maritime history and strategy and guide us through his eventful life and times. For any person interested in sea power, maritime strategy, and the British maritime experience before, during, and after World War I, this book is essential reading, providing a wealth of insights and knowledge. Ignore it at your own peril.

**J. J. Widen**  
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**Julia Ebner. *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-526-61678-4. Pp. 368. Hardcover: £15.29; paperback: £9.89; e-book (pdf/ epub/ mobi): £11.89.**

In her second book, *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*,<sup>3</sup> Julia Ebner takes a human-centred approach to explain the pathway towards online radicalisation, which ultimately leads to the emergence of digital extremists. Ebner, a Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in London, spent two years undercover in a variety of extremist movements to observe and study the movements from inside.

As many scholars in radicalisation and terrorism studies work on assumptions, her efforts to gather primary empirical data are both admirable and ambitious. Especially in the realm of online far-right extremism, the availability of empirical primary data remains thin. Ebner adopted different false identities to blend in with her subjects of analysis, both online and offline. At times, this resulted in parts of the book becoming rather descriptive as she is essentially summing up disclosed content. However, the extremely captivating narrative of this book and the rich variety of scholarly literature that she engages with, make it an excellent read for those that want an introduction to the field of digital extremism, and the online realm of the far-right and jihadist-driven organisations.

A recurring theme throughout Ebner's book is gender. This perspective adds an interesting dimension, as the far-right is often associated with having predominantly male recruits. Ebner engages with multiple female

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<sup>3</sup> This follows her first monograph, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (London & New York: I.B.Tauris, 2017).