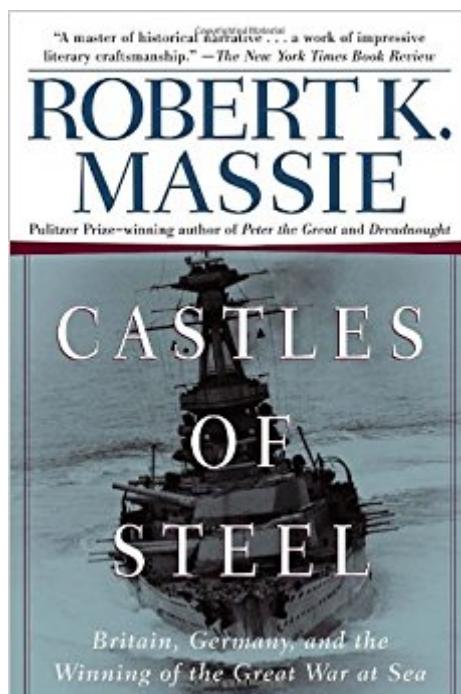


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# Castles Of Steel: Britain, Germany, And The Winning Of The Great War At Sea



## Synopsis

In a work of extraordinary narrative power, filled with brilliant personalities and vivid scenes of dramatic action, Robert K. Massie, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Peter the Great*, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, and *Dreadnought*, elevates to its proper historical importance the role of sea power in the winning of the Great War. The predominant image of this first world war is of mud and trenches, barbed wire, machine guns, poison gas, and slaughter. A generation of European manhood was massacred, and a wound was inflicted on European civilization that required the remainder of the twentieth century to heal. But with all its sacrifice, trench warfare did not win the war for one side or lose it for the other. Over the course of four years, the lines on the Western Front moved scarcely at all; attempts to break through led only to the lengthening of the already unbearably long casualty lists. For the true story of military upheaval, we must look to the sea. On the eve of the war in August 1914, Great Britain and Germany possessed the two greatest navies the world had ever seen. When war came, these two fleets of dreadnoughts—gigantic floating castles of steel able to hurl massive shells at an enemy miles away—were ready to test their terrible power against each other. Their struggles took place in the North Sea and the Pacific, at the Falkland Islands and the Dardanelles. They reached their climax when Germany, suffocated by an implacable naval blockade, decided to strike against the British ring of steel. The result was Jutland, a titanic clash of fifty-eight dreadnoughts, each the home of a thousand men. When the German High Seas Fleet retreated, the kaiser unleashed unrestricted U-boat warfare, which, in its indiscriminate violence, brought a reluctant America into the war. In this way, the German effort to “seize the trident” by defeating the British navy led to the fall of the German empire. Ultimately, the distinguishing feature of *Castles of Steel* is the author himself. The knowledge, understanding, and literary power Massie brings to this story are unparalleled. His portrayals of Winston Churchill, the British admirals Fisher, Jellicoe, and Beatty, and the Germans Scheer, Hipper, and Tirpitz are stunning in their veracity and artistry. *Castles of Steel* is about war at sea, leadership and command, courage, genius, and folly. All these elements are given magnificent scope by Robert K. Massie’s special and widely hailed literary mastery. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Nicholas and Alexandra* returns with a sequel to *Dreadnought* that is imposing in both size and quality, taking the British and German battle fleets through WWI. The fluent narrative begins amid the diplomatic crisis of July 1914 and ends with the scuttling of the German High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow in 1919. Massie makes a coherent if long narrative out of a sequence of events familiar to students of naval history but probably not to many other potential readers. The focus is on the two fleets that confronted each other across the North Sea, their weapons and tactics and their complex and controversial leaders, both military and political. As in his other books, the author describes his cast of characters with the vividness of a novelist, British Admiral Beatty's disastrous marriage being a painful case in point. What emerges from that focus is not only a number of outstanding battle narratives (Jutland is only the most famous), but a closely argued case for the German fleet having been a disaster for its country's war effort. Once built, the High Seas Fleet made war with England and the blockade of Germany inevitable. Unable to break the blockade with that expensive fleet, Germany felt compelled to choose between a negotiated peace and unrestricted submarine warfare. Once the Germans chose the latter course, American intervention and disaster become nearly unavoidable. It may seem odd to describe a book of this size as an "introduction," but readers will soon understand that the size of the topic requires a long narrative. "Castles of steel" was Winston Churchill's grand phrase for the Grand Fleet and its German counterpart, and this unusually fine military narrative lives up to it as well. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In "Dreadnought," Massie chronicled the buildup of the British and German navies in the years before the First World War. Here he continues the story, showing the fleets in preparation for their inevitable decisive engagement. When the clash finally came, in 1916, at the Battle of Jutland, it

was a somewhat muddled affair and both sides claimed victory. This centerpiece battle springs to life, thanks to Massie's clear grasp of tactics and his suspenseful narration. His portraits of major figures—including Winston Churchill, then a brash First Lord of the Admiralty, and the death-haunted Admiral von Spee—are perceptive and entralling, and he writes of war's casualties with grim directness. Jutland marks a fascinating juncture in naval warfare: when the gentlemanly sea battle gave way to a more technical type of encounter. Submarines, which the British considered "the weapon of cowards," had already begun to dominate. Massie poignantly describes the sailors on older ships, who, when they spotted a modern cruiser on the horizon, knew that they were doomed, hours before the enemy fired a shot. Copyright © 2005 The New Yorker --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

These dense tomes are a lot of fun to this hardcore history fanatic. If you liked Massie's books about the czars, you'll probably like this too. It even has many familiar places, and in the case of "Nicholas and Alexandra", many familiar faces. The titles may be misleading. Yes, there is a great importance placed on battleships, but it's a mere focal point. Massie credits battleships and naval development with the driving force that changed the world from the Victorian era, where England ruled the oceans of the entire world, to an age in which the world and its seas were suddenly far too crowded. "Dreadnought" leads us through those world changes, and "Castles of Steel" takes us through the resulting cataclysm, World War I. If there is any complaint to be had, it may be that Massie's books are just so huge and detailed. But he is a lover of history, and he includes all these details because they are almost always too interesting to omit.

Tremendous account of information. Book is dense and meaty. Starts with a rather detailed account of the personalities involved before moving on to the history. The book is fairly anglo-centric, which is to say most of the book deals with the British side of events. I might like a more balanced look at things, but as it stands there is still plenty of information and analysis on the German side as well. One thing I could have used was more diagrams of the various ship designs that might have better helped me to understand the actions. Battleship design was still evolving, and the standard 'turrets on the centerline' design was far from standard in WW1. I'm not a naval historian, and could have used the extra detail. I can't believe I just said that about one of the most detailed books I've read in a long time! Still, Wikipedia and all that.

This contains extremely detailed treatment of the naval side of WW I between Britain and

Germany. It differs greatly from its predecessor "Dreadnought" which covered a large time frame and the diplomatic ins and outs of the huge time period (pre-American Civil War to the outbreak of WW I) and does not have so many mini-biographies of the persons involved. I would say "Dreadnought" is the better and more interesting of the books. "Castles of Steel" is definitely for hardcore lovers of naval history as it covers engagements at sea in extreme detail, down to the signals flown by the flagships and the intelligence reports received by both sides, not to mention almost each hit received by the ships involved. Overall a great book, but compared with part I of the 2-book series (not sure if it's billed as such, but that is the case) it is slightly too involved with the minutiae for my taste. Still I give it 4 stars because of the staggering amount of research and work that must have been necessary for Massie to write it.

Castles of Steel should be read with *Dreadnought*. Though clearly related, *Dreadnought* and *Castles of Steel* address different times and very different themes. *Castles of Steel* takes one into the great naval battles of WW I and gives the best description I have yet read of the Battle of Jutland. I am reading it a second time. I was surprised to find my previous opinion of the British admirals overturned. To me, Admiral Beatty was the bold and heroic figure of the naval battles and Admiral Jellicoe, his superior, too conservative and too cautious to merit accolades. That view probably fits well with the general opinion. Massie provides fairly thorough biographical background on both admirals and also gives us a very good understanding of the challenges they faced. Admiral Beatty now seems to me to be a bit reckless and a bit too anxious to be a second Nelson. By contrast, Admiral Jellicoe emerges as one who wanted most to do his duty to his country and who, probably, was the most able officer in the Royal Navy to handle the challenge. Churchill famously said of Admiral Jellicoe that he was the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon. But he could only lose it if he were reckless with the Grand Fleet under his command. Even if the Grand Fleet never fired a shot, so long as that fleet continued to exist, sailing out of Scapa Flow to bar the passage from the North Sea to the North Atlantic, the German High Seas Fleet was an impotent and costly draw on the German treasury. Jellicoe understood that, and he never lost sight of his duty to win the war rather than personal laurels. He was a great man and Britain was lucky to have him when it counted. *Dreadnought* spends some time on the development of HMS *Dreadnought*, but for the most part is a collection of biographies woven into the events that led to the Great War. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Germany, and particularly the kaiser, brought the war on and bear the chief responsibility for the catastrophes that flowed from it. If the kaiser's father had not died of cancer early in life and had still been ruling in the first decades of the

20th Century it seems very likely there would have been no war. He was a very different man than his excitable and immature son, Kaiser William. Reading Massie, one is struck by the remarkable degree that individual personalities played a role in events leading to the war. We constantly hear the balderdash about laws of history and economics and power, but fail to recognize that all of those are given real world consequences by individuals, some of whom are sagacious while others are reckless. In this context, it is frightening to see how accidents and the blundering of a few juvenile, stupid, or dangerous people could ignite Armageddon even when a sophisticated political class saw the danger and could not avoid it despite their best efforts. For them it must have been a little like riding in the back seat of a car driven by an intoxicated teenage boy who floors the accelerator believing it is safe to pass on blind corners. He actually gets away with it a few times. In the present, unfortunately, our political class is so degraded it seems everything is run by juveniles and none of the adults can be found. Given the lessons of WW I, that should not give reason for much optimism.

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