

Alastair Cooper review of:

Peter Jones, *Australia's Argonauts: The Remarkable Story of the First Class to Enter the Royal Australian Naval College*

(West Geelong, Vic.: Barrallier Books trading as Echo Books, 2016), 761 pp., \$59.95, ISBN 97809994624611

Australia's Argonauts is indeed a remarkable book. It is both individual and institutional history; social and military history; policy and operational history; and examines these issues over much of Australia's twentieth century. Written by retired Vice Admiral Peter Jones, it describes the personal and professional lives of the 28 young Australians selected to form the first group of students for the Royal Australian Naval College, the Pioneer Class, who joined the Navy in 1913. By virtue of the broad approach it takes, *Australia's Argonauts* goes beyond most military and naval history, which more typically focus on individual people or ships, or on more specific aspects of particular operations, policy or equipment capability. For this reason alone the book is without many close parallels.

After Federation in 1901, there was extensive debate about the form Australia's naval forces should take. This was resolved in 1911 with the transition of the Commonwealth Naval Forces into the Royal Australian Navy, the announcement of the purchase of ships and submarines to form a Fleet Unit and the establishment of training facilities for the sailors and officers to operate them. While Australia's navy was consciously and closely modelled on and integrated with Britain's Royal Navy, there were significant differences from the start. These were driven in part by Australian officials and in part by Royal Navy officers on loan to Australia, who aimed to establish a training system both appropriate to Australia and without some of the problems of the original British model. The result was a conscious Australian choice; though it was necessarily similar to its Royal Navy antecedents, it was sufficiently different to distinguish it and the officers it produced. The process to establish what became the Royal Australian Naval College provides the starting point for *Australia's Argonauts*, as it describes the selection process and broad social background of the first naval cadets. While the book's focus is on the members of the Pioneer Class, it provides extensive descriptions of the naval officers and academic staff who shaped the college at its outset.

Australia's Argonauts describes the Pioneer Class's education and training, which commenced at age 13, at Osborne House in Geelong and then at Jervis Bay; their subsequent dispatch to Britain to join Royal Navy ships during the second half of

World War I; their service through the interwar period and then as more senior officers during World War II and the Korean War. The longest-serving officers were compulsorily retired at age 60 at the end of 1959. While some reached high rank, most notably Vice Admiral Sir John Collins who served for seven years as the first naval member of the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board and chief of naval staff, there was a wide range of personal and professional lives. Several did not pass the Naval College course; one died from meningitis and two died in accidents at sea before they reached the age of 20; the winner of the King's medal for the top cadet midshipman left the Navy during postwar retrenchments to pursue a business career; some found the Navy life was not to their liking and resigned; some struggled with alcoholism; several were killed in action during World War II. A significant number of this class played leading roles as operational commanders during the Pacific War, with roles ranging from Task Group and warship command and the creation and direction of the famous Coastwatcher network, to the organisation of the Navy in Australia and the supply of munitions and technology for its ships. *Australia's Argonauts* describes the part these people played in events throughout their professional lives; while it is clearly focused on the Royal Australian Navy, the activities of those who did not pursue a naval career are also described.

The book has its origins in the author's experience in the late 1980s as a more junior officer working for the then chief of naval staff, Vice Admiral M. W. Hudson. In preparing to remember the life of what he thought was the last member of the Naval College's Pioneer Class, Peter Jones discovered how little was known of many, what they had done in life and that at least one was still alive. Initially the project to describe the life and service of this group fell to Tony Grazebrook, the defence reporter and naval historian; a natural choice given his deep knowledge of the Royal Navy's senior officer cohort and the history of both the British and Australian navies. With Tony's passing and the completion of his own full-time naval service, Peter Jones took up the project again and built on the research to that point. This is significant for at least two reasons. First, the book is based on over three decades of research by two students of the Royal Australian Navy's history. In doing so they have shed light on people and periods of history that had not been studied with such detail or, in some cases, studied at all. So *Australia's Argonauts* is based on a large body of original research, which shows through in the final product. Second, recalling the breadth of the subject, the research task that was needed to produce a book like this was very large, made even bigger simply because of the small number of other historians who have done significant work in this field.

There are few parallels for a book of this nature, certainly in the field of Australian military history and likely in Australian history or military history more broadly. Written several decades earlier, Rick Atkinson's *The Long Grey Line* is perhaps the closest. *The Long Grey Line* is an account of the service of the West Point Class of 1966, which suffered one of the highest proportions of casualties of any West Point class and whose service covered some of the most turbulent periods of the

US Army's history. Even this book has the advantage of a narrower chronological focus and more readily accessible primary sources, highlighting the achievement in the research for *Australia's Argonauts*.

The relatively underdeveloped nature of Australian naval history is even more pronounced in the area of naval personnel. *Australia's Argonauts* stands alongside the work by historians such as Ian Cunningham, Kathryn Spurling and Jason Sears, and more recently Ian Pfennigwerth and Christine Reghenzani, to have placed a focus on the people of the Royal Australian Navy and the social context in which they served. This makes the work particularly valuable for the contribution it makes and the insight it provides into naval culture. Given the contemporary appreciation for the importance of culture as a crucial element in the success of an organisation, *Australia's Argonauts* should be very useful, not just for those interested in navies or military organisations, but students of social history more broadly.

The book is not without its faults, although these are perhaps the inescapable consequence of the task attempted. With such a broad scope it raises and addresses numerous questions, and integrating them into a single narrative must have been a challenge. By attempting to describe the lives of so many people, doing justice to their professional and personal experiences, over the best part of four decades, *Australia's Argonauts* is sometimes difficult to keep up with, as the reader has to follow the lives of over 30 people (students and staff) and make sense of the breadth and diversity of the events in their lives. This is no reflection on the quality of the writing, which is good, but simply a reflection of the scope. Some of the events could and have been the subjects of books in their own right and to describe them from a Pioneer Class–centric perspective is both original and challenging. For example, the ironically named 1918 Battle of May Island, in which many of the Pioneer Class were involved as midshipmen and one was killed, was a complex and confusing series of navigation accidents that occurred in poor visibility at night. The description in the book is accurate and written with care and precision, but needs to be read with equal care and precision and would have benefited from better charts or diagrams to aid clarity. Paradoxically, even at its considerable 761-page length (with the text finishing after 642 pages), there are also many questions that could have been explored further, particularly more comparative analysis of the Pioneer Class against other classes from the Naval College, the other service colleges and Australian society more generally. The book is in this sense more descriptive than analytical history.

Australia's Argonauts is published by Echo Books and is very well produced for something of this scale with such limited production resources. This publisher is noteworthy for its innovative processes. *Australia's Argonauts* might not have been a viable commercial publishing proposition when it was first conceived; however, the disruption driven by electronic publications and innovations that have followed have enabled books with much smaller print runs to appear. For a subject that

is somewhat niche in practice, if not in scope or application, publishers such as Echo Books are significant and valuable partners. There are a small number of editing errors, which are minor distractions rather than significant problems. Given its breadth and difficulty to categorise, it would likely have been a challenging publication prospect for a mainstream publisher. Acknowledging the implications for cost and complexity, more maps and charts would probably have helped in the description of some of the operational aspects, where the physical orientation and special relationships of people, islands and ships is so crucial to understanding what occurred and why people reacted as they did.

So, is it worth it? Absolutely yes. Peter Jones writes engagingly and authoritatively. His knowledge of the Australian Navy as an institution and the research that he conducted for this book is evident and one of reasons the book is so good. What is also apparent is the regard the author had for the people about whom he writes. The Pioneer Class and the staff of the Royal Australian Naval College are described with compassionate insight. There are no unnecessary judgements and the people are understood on their own terms and the context of their time.

For naval historians, this is a significant reference work. It also lights the path for other historians by demonstrating what can be done and what else remains to be done. For example, between 1913 and 1958 most naval officers joined as 13-year-olds, with subsequent changes progressively increasing that age to the current 17–18-year-old minimum. There is little work that describes the changes and the impact on the Navy, nor places them in the context of contemporary Australian society. Similarly, the 1986 commencement of training most officers at the joint service Australian Defence Force Academy had a significant impact on the culture and cohesion of the Navy officer corps, but it has not been studied in any detail. Looking at individuals, the survey of the first 28 officers through the Naval College, and the fascinating lives they led, naturally leads to wondering about the hundreds and thousands who followed in their footsteps; there are many opportunities for further research and publication.

For Australian historians, this is a work that provides an insight into an Australian national institution that is not always well understood. Far from being slavishly or unthinkingly British in its approach, the Royal Australian Navy was consciously Australian from its inception, actively using and benefiting from its relationship with the Royal Navy: *Australia's Argonauts* describes one major element, personnel policies, of this process.

Australia's Argonauts is an important contribution to naval and Australian history; its account of the first class at the Royal Australian Naval College is unlikely to be surpassed. The book should definitely be held by all Australian and international tertiary libraries, by those with an interest in naval and military history and also in twentieth-century social history.

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