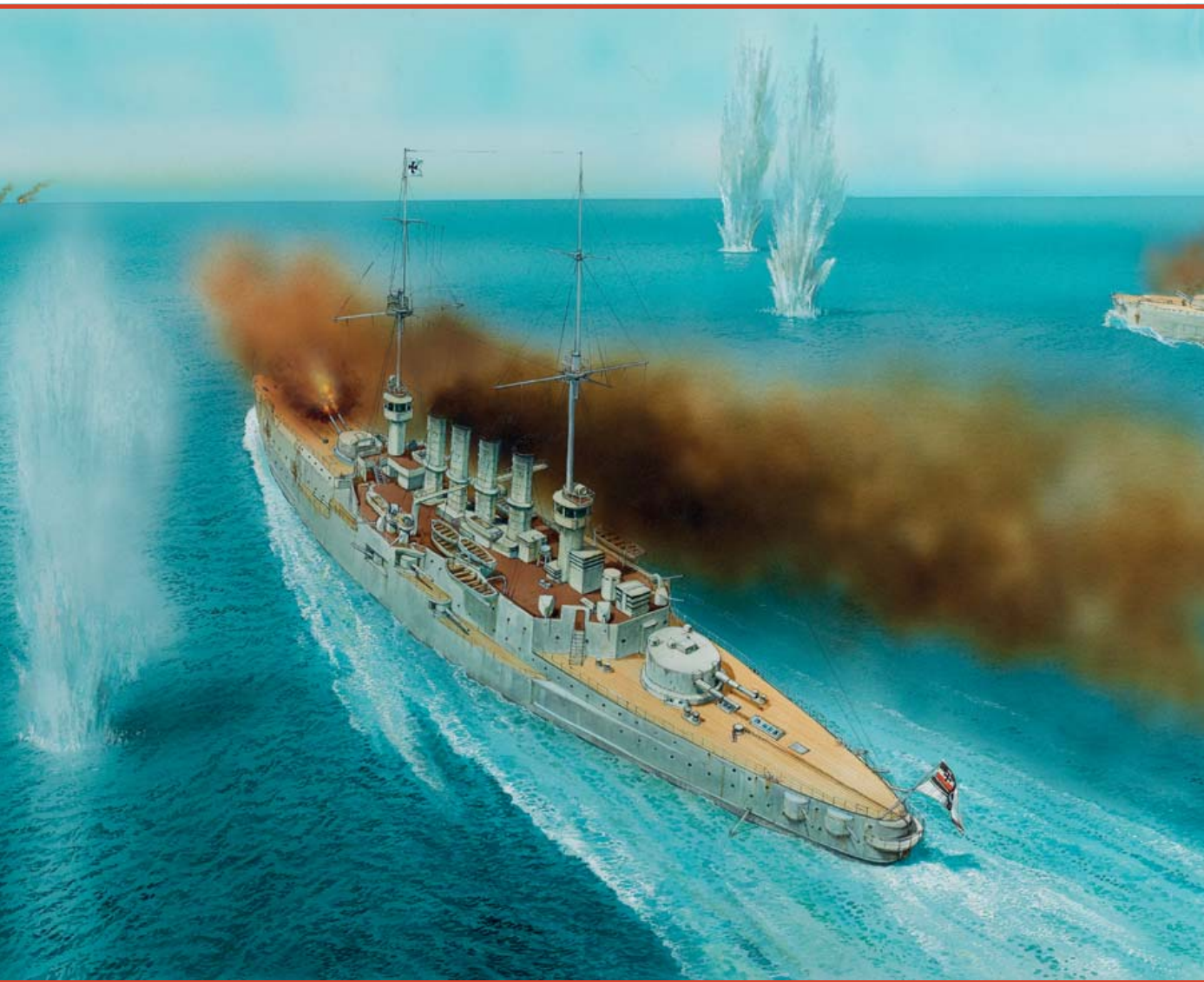
CORONEL AND FALKLANDS 1914

Duel in the South Atlantic



MICHAEL McNALLY

ILLUSTRATED BY PETER DENNIS

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Series editor Marcus Cowper

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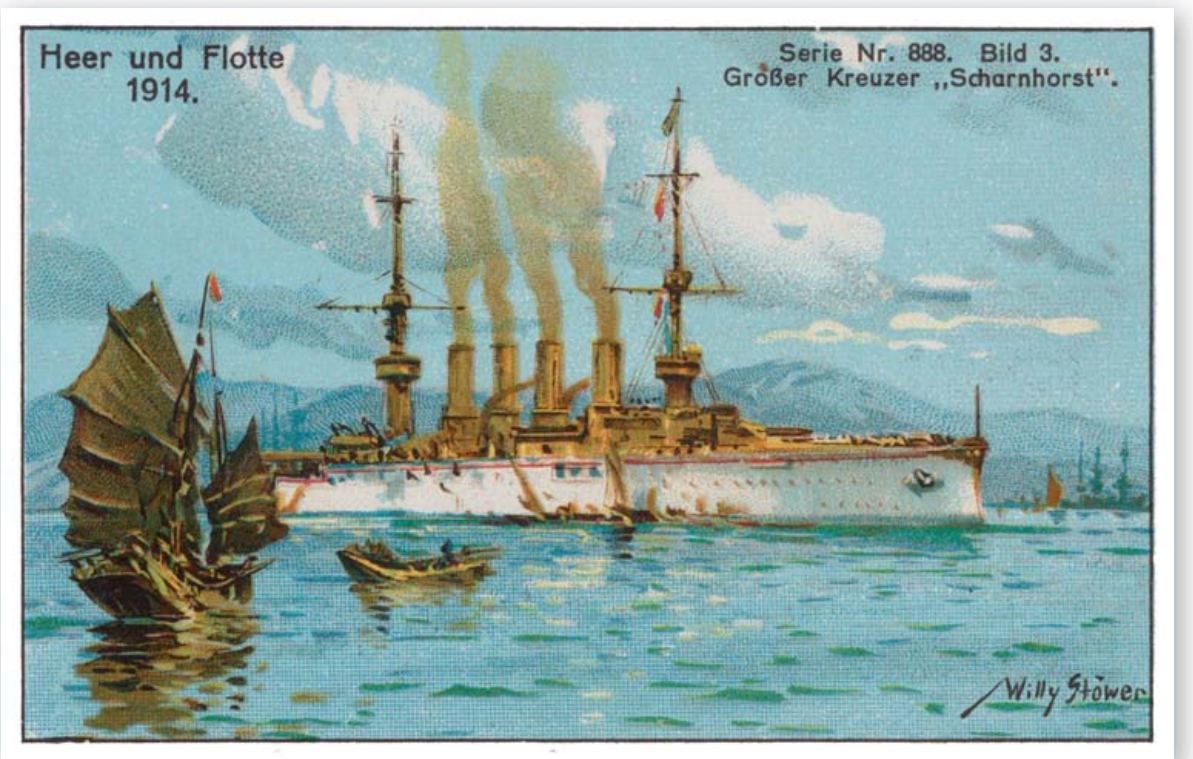
THE STRATEGIC SITUATION

OPPOSITE: The end of the Nürnberg following the battle of the Falkland Islands in a print after Stöwer. (Author's collection)

BELOW: *SMS Scharnhorst im Fernosten*. In more peaceable times, this print – after Stöwer – shows *Scharnhorst* in her tropical colour scheme. (Author's collection)

At midnight on Tuesday, 4 August 1914, the world changed for ever when Great Britain issued an ultimatum to both Germany and France. It required that, in the event of hostilities between them, both countries would respect the neutrality of Belgium, enshrined within the 1839 Treaty of London. Britain, as one of the treaty's signatories, was obliged to defend this condition; France, aware that she needed time to organize her armed forces for her own defence, immediately acceded to British demands; Germany, on the other hand, merely replied that whilst she would not annex any Belgian territory – thereby tacitly respecting the kingdom's sovereignty – she could not allow France the opportunity to use this same terrain to launch a pre-emptive attack. Berlin was again pressed to accede to British demands. No response was received and Whitehall sent instructions to the fleet to commence hostilities.



HMS *Triumph*. Like *Canopus* this outdated battleship was hurriedly pressed into service in order to meet Maximilian von Spee's threat and manned by a mixture of reservists and Army personnel. (IWM, Q040369)

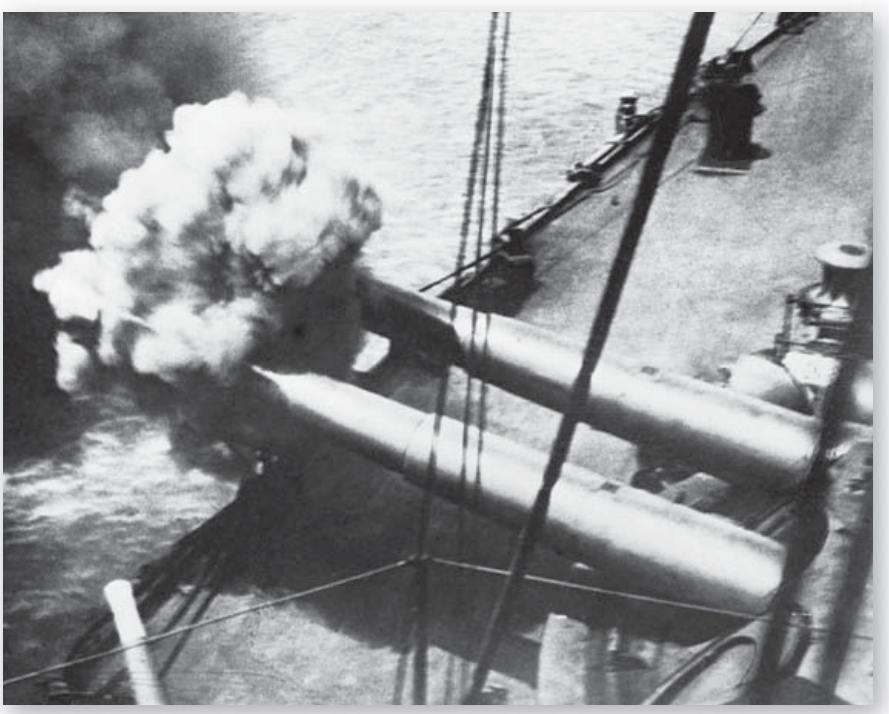
Britain had been lucky to have at her disposal the services of perhaps the greatest of her reforming admirals, Admiral Sir John 'Jacky' Fisher. He had not only embraced modern technology and the development of bigger and better warships but was also – in the face of Germany's provocative Naval Construction Programme – not afraid to 'wield the administrative axe' where necessary and his draconian measures resulted in savings that went a long way towards the Royal Navy redefining itself as a more modern force during the pre-war years. Indeed Britain took the lead in ship construction with the commissioning in 1906 of HMS *Dreadnought*, the world's first 'all heavy gun' warship and the epitome of Fisher's dictum that firepower and speed would be the two deciding factors in future naval combat. This revolutionary design would, for two decades, become the yardstick by which all fleets were measured, and the acquisition of such vessels become a sign of prestige that would help to drive at least one nation into near bankruptcy and another into World War I, on the side of the Central Powers.

Unlike its counterpart and despite its name, the German Imperial Navy did not come into being because of the needs or requirements of empire, but simply from Kaiser Wilhelm II's desire to beard his English relatives by striking out at British naval tradition. In his own mind, he wanted to meet his uncle, King Edward VII (and then his cousin, King George V) on equal terms. But it was one thing to fantasize about having a large fleet, and another to make it a reality and when, after a naval dinner at Kiel, he asked where the future of the German Navy lay, one of the guests, replied with one word – 'battleships'. This simple response lay perfectly in keeping with the Kaiser's own inclinations and would propel the officer – Alfred von Tirpitz – into a career which would see him dominate the German Navy for over 20 years.

Ostensibly, the aim behind the German programme, known collectively as the *'Novelles'* or 'Navy Laws', was to prevent a repetition of 1870 when the French fleet was able to bombard the German coastline at will. Now, with the Dual Entente between France and Russia, it was conceivable that Germany could be dragged into a war on two fronts with the best way to adequately protect her coastline would be to have a large enough fleet to be able to take the maritime offensive.

After the turn of the century, following the successful passing of the Second Navy Bill, the grateful emperor had ennobled his bourgeois protégé and the newly created Admiral von Tirpitz began to pursue an objective that, for the time being at least, he was wise enough to conceal from both foreign and domestic observers – the creation of a modern fleet. This fleet, whilst unable to challenge Britain on a global basis, would in a single, specific theatre of operations be strong enough to render uncertain the outcome of any major engagement so that, even in victory, Britain would suffer such damage at German hands as to endanger her position as the world's premier naval power.

With Britain's senior naval command changing with each change of government, the continual favour that von Tirpitz enjoyed at both the Reichstag and the Imperial Court ensured that the German Navy displayed consistency at the highest levels, thus ensuring a similar consistency in naval construction that was to prove decisive during the coming conflict. Whilst Fisher was obliged to weed out obsolete vessels before he could press ahead with his overhaul of the Royal Navy, his German counterpart was simply able to divert Imperial funds into his new construction programme; Fisher's vision was of fast warships which would overwhelm the enemy with a combination of speed and firepower, von Tirpitz's, however, was one where the vessels could absorb significant enemy damage and still be able to fight their guns.



'The greatest protection' – British 12in. guns in action. (IWM, Q053498)

TOP
Both sides pressed civilian vessels into service as military auxiliaries – *Empress of Asia* was one of the many scouts employed during the search for *Emden*. (IWM, Q058071)

BOTTOM
HMS *Glasgow*. Unable to influence the outcome of Coronel, *Glasgow* played a creditable role at the Falklands and in finally bringing *Dresden* to bay. (IWM, Q021286)

This 'risk strategy', as it has become known, was clearly based upon the premise that the Imperial Navy would only need to achieve local equality in order to avoid a naval catastrophe, as her potential 'enemy' would be wary of achieving a major victory at the cost of losing its own naval primacy. On paper this argument seemed watertight, but it fatally ignored the fact that Britain had no need to risk a fleet engagement and instead could rely on numbers and her unique geographical position simply to blockade the German coast. In all likelihood it would therefore be Germany herself who would instigate any naval confrontation, and behind much of von Tirpitz's planning lay a single overriding concern, the fear of which would drive him to push ever grander proposals through the Reichstag. In August 1807, Britain had attacked the then neutral Denmark and, under cover of an armed landing, seized the Danish fleet in Copenhagen harbour in order to 'prevent' it from falling into French hands. It was this spectre of his ships being

'Copenhagened' as such an operation had subsequently become known, that haunted Tirpitz during what was referred to as 'the time of greatest danger' i.e. the time before a sufficient proportion of the fleet had been completed.

The Kaiserliche Marine, with few exceptions, would ultimately concentrate its entire strength in home waters, so that at the beginning of World War I it had few overseas deployments. In the Caribbean, for example, the Imperial Flag was flown by the light cruiser *Dresden* (shortly to be replaced by *Karlsruhe*), whilst East African waters were patrolled by *Königsberg*. The jewel in the crown, however, operated from the naval base at Tsingtao in China and was organized around the modern armoured cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau,* supported by the lesser-armed but just as modern *Leipzig*, *Nürnberg* and *Emden*. They were officially referred to as 'die Ostasiengeschwader' (East Asia Squadron) and simply known to their crews and the German people, as 'die Geschwader' (the Squadron).

Accordingly, Berlin became overconfident and was complacent in the belief that Britain would remain peaceful in the afterglow of her 'century of splendid isolation'. But stung into carrying out its own naval construction programme, the Royal Navy would, in fact, not only remain ahead of the Kaiserliche Marine in the race to build bigger and better capital ships, but also had in Fisher a leader who, deciding upon a course of action, would terrier-like pursue it to its final conclusion.

Presciently, Fisher was convinced that a major, global conflict or 'Armageddon', as he termed it, would ensue in October 1914. In preparation for this he intended that the Royal Navy would be prepared for any

Unable to answer the superior enemy gunnery adequately, the fate of the woefully under-armed *Monmouth* was sealed in the opening moments of Coronel. (IWM, Q039657)

challenges it might face, maintaining that its modernization was being held back by the costs of manning and maintaining a large number of ships that he viewed as obsolete. Fisher would remain unperturbed in the face of a massive public backlash at the planned restructure and, on his orders, more than 150 vessels of various classes were either sold off or placed into the Naval Reserve. The saving, in both cost and manpower, generated by this austerity constituted the first steps in the enforced modernization of the navy; despite the implementation of an accelerated naval construction programme, which formed the British response to Germany's Navy Acts, the Royal Navy's planned expenditure for 1905 would be almost 10 per cent lower than for the period prior to his appointment.

Fisher was convinced of the need for improvement in all areas of naval gunnery and brought this belief with him when he assumed the chairmanship of the Committee on Design. Almost immediately work began on the development of one of the most radical designs in naval history: a fast, 'all big gun' battleship, whose turreted armament would be deployed specifically to maximize its firepower in all directions. Coupled with an increase in protective armour plating, and capable of relatively high speeds, this new battleship would be far superior to all vessels of all nations then in service. It was from this superiority that the class of vessel would derive its name – *Dreadnought*.

Eventually, Fisher began to think laterally, and plans were soon laid to marry his gunnery theories to the next-smallest class of vessels in the Royal Navy – the cruisers. The workhorses of a modern navy, these vessels had evolved to become adept at several tasks, ranging from scouting in advance of the main battle fleets to independent action and warfare against the enemy's merchant navy. They ranged from fast light cruisers, which relied on their speed to perform their duties, to heavier vessels, which would act as principal warships in foreign waters, often as squadron flagships. Before Fisher's promotion in 1904, most nations, Britain included, had sought to enhance the

Sturdee's flagship, *Invincible,* narrowly escaped destruction during the closing stages of the Falklands, a fate that would overtake her at Jutland two years later. (IWM, Q039274)