

With the centenary of World War I approaching, historian and journalist **TONY BOULLEMIER** reviews a book that gets to the bottom of its causes.

First published in 2007, *DREADNOUGHT – Britain, German and the coming of the Great War*, by Robert K. Massie is well worth revisiting. Being American, he can view it from a neutral angle. Indeed, he looks at it from every angle, starting around 1870.

He gives us a mini-biography of every major player from Queen Victoria, King Edward VII, Lord Salisbury, Balfour, Joe Chamberlain, First Sea Lord Jacky Fisher, Asquith, Lloyd George and Churchill. Plus Tirpitz, father of the German Navy, Bismarck and subsequent German chancellors, including Bulow and Bethmann-Hollweg. And towering unsteadily over them all, Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Massie explains that this was literally true. William's difficult forceps birth had left him with a left arm that was useless and looked like a miniature version of his right. All his life he needed someone to cut up his meat and he was so unbalanced that riding a horse was extremely difficult.

It is not hard to accept that this must have contributed hugely to his mental state. He was unhinged and totally unpredictable.

He admired Britain and wanted to be respected here. But he felt he was not. He loved visiting Cowes Week yet even when his yacht, the *Meteor* won, he would still lambast the Royal Yacht Club for giving it too high a handicap. In modern parlance, he felt he was being 'dissed'.

William was mightily impressed by Britain's Grand Fleet and wanted one of his own. Admiral Tirpitz seized on this ambition and so began the great naval race. Thanks to the eccentric but brilliant Jacky Fisher, Britain pioneered the *Dreadnought*, the first all big-gun battleship. Soon, Britain and Germany were racing to outbuild each other's Dreadnought fleets.

Fisher said we had to stay ahead of Germany as it had now replaced France as the European power we had to fear most. But despairing Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey said the spending was "a satire on civilisation." If it went on, he said, "I believe it will submerge civilisation".

The crises kept piling up with Germany always in the thick of it as she kept flexing her empire-building muscles: Fashoda, the Boer War, the Boxer Rebellion, Morocco . . . and the Daily Telegraph interview in 1908. In it, the Kaiser said he had always been a friend of England but his friendship was unappreciated." He asserted that the British were "as mad as March hares" and talked of "distortions" by our press at his "repeated offers of friendship."

He said this made it difficult for him to promote friendship because "the majority of Germans disliked the English." Among several enormous lies, he claimed to have supplied the plan by which Lord Roberts defeated the Boers.

The Kaiser was so mortified by the domestic reaction to his interview, that for a while he seriously considered abdication. Sadly he did not consider it again.

The Anglo-German rivalry was not the only major pointer to war. The Russians were smarting from their humiliation in 1908 when the Tsar climbed down from war with Germany's ally Austria-Hungary, over its annexation of the Slavic provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The many fuses, which had long been laid, were finally lit on June 28 1914 when the heir to Austria's throne was assassinated in Sarajevo. Austria blamed Serbia for being behind the plot and began to bombard Belgrade but the Tsar was in no mood to let another Slavic ally fall into Austrian hands and began to mobilize his army.

Russia's ally France wanted to remain neutral but Germany demanded that to guarantee this, she handed over her great border fortresses. France had to refuse. And as this also gave her the chance of recovering her lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, she too was drawn in.

Britain had not long before moved its Mediterranean Fleet to home waters and France had done the reverse, moving its Atlantic Fleet to the Mediterranean. There was an informal arrangement to look after one another's interests.

Years earlier Fisher had predicted that Armageddon would come as soon as the Kiel Canal was widened to allow Dreadnoughts to pass quickly from the Baltic to the North Sea. And by a deadly twist of fate, this work was finished in July 1914 as Europe was reeling from the assassination crisis.

There was now the prospect of German Dreadnoughts suddenly appearing in the Channel and shelling a defenceless French coast unless Britain intervened.

When Germany announced it would invade France via Belgium, there was a public outcry. But Massie believes the real reason Asquith, Grey and the rest bowed to the inevitable, was the need to support France.

If it fell, as it had done in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, Germany could have hoovered up the Low Countries and Denmark too. And with its Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian allies, bestrode all of Northern Europe and the Balkans. We simply could not let that happen.

One man could have stopped it all. The man who gave Austria 'a blank cheque' to attack Serbia and allowed his own generals to set in motion their long-cherished plan to knock out France in six weeks before turning on Russia. The man with the miniature left arm.

Whoever handled the forceps on the day the Kaiser was born, may unknowingly have set Europe on the way to its costliest ever war.

My one criticism of the book is its length. I feel the biographies and the diplomatic comings and goings could have been beneficially edited down to make Massie's conclusions more prominent.

DREADNOUGHT is published in paperback by Vintage Books, price £14.99.

Tony Boullemier is the author of *The Little Book of Monarchs*, a history book for children, intended to provide a concise illustrated narrative of England's kings and queens since 1066, at a time when history is slipping off the curriculum.

For more information see www.boullemierbooks.co.uk

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