

British Ships in the Confederate Navy

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Review

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McKenna, Joseph *British Ships in the Confederate Navy*. McFarland & Company, Inc., \$49.95 ISBN 978-0-7864-4530-1

A Look at Great Britain's Role in Building the Confederate Navy

In 1860, the United States had the second largest merchant fleet in the world, and was well on the road to assume dominance. By the end of the Civil War, America barely had a merchant navy. This was the direct and indirect result of the Confederate commerce raiders. The confrontation took place on the oceans of the world as well as in the halls of government at the highest levels, and involved spies, intrigue, propaganda, and the law.

Though many students of the history of the American Civil War are familiar with the story of the Confederate commerce raider *Alabama* and Captain Raphael Semmes, there were other raiders with which they are probably less familiar such as the *Florida*, *Shenandoah*, *Georgia*, *Rappahannock*, *Alexandra*, and *Pampero*. Mr. McKenna has included the *Sumter*, *Nashville*, *Chickamauga*, *Clarence*, *Tacony*, *Archer*, *Tallahassee*, and *Tuscaloosa*, because they have importance in the story of the British ships even if they were not "British Ships" or had been built in Britain with the intention of running the blockade and not raiding American merchant shipping.

The Confederate naval agent, James Dunwoody Bulloch, had to work within the confines of the British Foreign Enlistment Act to build and equip his cruisers and enlist crews. He and his captains also had to know the limitations under which Queen Victoria's Neutrality Proclamation placed them in order to maintain their ships and crews while at sea and in foreign ports. Because of the restrictions placed on him, Bulloch had to have ships built which could overcome those restrictions and perform their mission with the greatest possibility of success. Men such as Raphael Semmes, John Newland Maffitt, and James I. Waddell, were forced to use their skills as seamen and their initiative in

unusual situations, as well as make a thorough study of the law and diplomacy in order to adhere to their orders.

In addition to the commerce raiders, Mr. McKenna devotes several chapters to the ships and men who ran the blockade. A few of the ships and their captains were in the employ of the Confederate government, but there were a number of interesting Englishmen, 4 of whom were high ranking officers of the Royal Navy, who were engaged in the business. British businessmen saw an opportunity to make a large profit and financed the building, operation, purchasing and warehousing of goods, and servicing the ships, as well as hiring the best captains and the best men to serve the ships by offering wages which drew them to the trade.

Blockade running involved great skill in handling a ship as well as the services of a good pilot who knew the shores, rivers, and entrances, of such blockaded ports as Wilmington, North Carolina, Charleston, South Carolina, and Mobile, Alabama, where an encounter with a Union warship or a mishap with obstructions might lead to the capture or destruction of the ship and its contents, or the loss of life.

This new book would make good reading for someone unfamiliar with the subject, but there should be some rigorous editing and fact-checking in a new edition. A number of factual errors undermine the book's credibility. For example, Gladstone was not the Prime Minister of Great Britain at the time of the Civil War; it was Lord Palmerston. Mobile, Alabama, did not fall to Union forces when Farragut won the battle of Mobile Bay in August, 1864; that happened on April 12, 1865. The battle of Mobile Bay closed the port to Confederate operations and blockade running. The Emperor of France did not expect to acquire the state of Texas for his help in building ships for the Confederates; he had hoped to acquire it to help him further his interests in Mexico. The Confederate government did not consider his request.

It would have been good if Mr. McKenna had discussed the Washington Treaty – which is not mentioned - and the Geneva Arbitration. While he does state that Britain paid the United States \$15,500,000.00, expanding on these subjects would have made the relations between the United States and Britain before, during, and after, the war, clearer. There should have been a thorough discussion of both the British Foreign Enlistment Act and Queen Victoria's Proclamation of Neutrality as they affected the building and equipping of the

future raiders, and what the raiders could expect from the governments of the foreign ports which they entered.

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