

Shipwrecked: A True Civil War Story of Mutinies, Jailbreaks, Blockade-Running and the Slave Trade

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Review

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Appleton Oaksmith had a colorful life, which is amply told in these pages. He was a seafarer who made it to the Gold Rush California. He was implicated in filibustering schemes in Nicaragua and Cuba. The unlamented African Slave Trade was also part of his background. The author, Jonathan White, takes advantage of the Oaksmith Papers at Duke and its sibling in Chapel Hill: there are allied collections in Charlottesville, the New York Historical Society and the New York Public Library.

A good deal of this book concerns his odious venture into slave trading. Unfortunately for him, this reviled enterprise intersected with the decision of Abraham Lincoln to crackdown—finally—on this aid to potential and actual secessionists, leading to his arrest and conviction. However, in 1862 the wily freebooter escaped from incarceration and became a Confederate blockade runner in Havana. Washington sought to have him kidnapped—putatively a violation of international law—but their valiant attempt was foiled. Oaksmith continued to proclaim his innocence and spent about a decade in exile until he received a presidential pardon from President Grant, whereupon he moved to North Carolina and became an anti-Klan politician.

In relating this fascinating story, the author also manages to shed light on numerous allied matters e.g. the execution of Nathaniel Gordon—a rarity: a slave trader subjected to the death penalty; the adjacent matters of U.S. slave traders in Brazil and African resistance to this hateful business; the assassination of Lincoln and the allied attempt on the life of Secretary of State

William Seward; the role of Cuba during the U.S. Civil War; the bloodily violent so-called “Draft Riot” in New York City during the height of the war; and the maunderings of “Copperhead” Clement L. Vallandigham.

Like a number of other Confederates, Oaksmith fled to England after his inglorious cause was defeated. There he continued his penchant for derring-do, serving as a journalist during the epochal Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. Other relatives wound up in Cuba. However, as noted, Oaksmith sought a different kind of redemption, gaining election to the legislature of the Tarheel state, serving alongside 17 African-American men. He defeated what was described as “a regular Southern ‘war horse;’” i.e., an unalloyed white supremacist. His redemptive thrust included fervent anti-KKK sentiments and trumpeting the rights of the newly emancipated (233). Remarkably given his distasteful past, he proclaimed, “‘Away with all talk about the white man’s party’” as he backed “‘equality in all things political,’” while opening the door to the ascending Jim Crow in demanding “‘distinctions, according to the personal rights of each, in all things social.’” (233)

Still, given the reigning attitudes of comparable Euro-Americans in Dixie, Oaksmith stands out conspicuously, sharing the stage with the celebrated Henry Highland Garnet where the message was clear: “‘The time has come when slavery shall be banished from the face of the earth.’” (236) It was Oaksmith who demanded that Washington “‘interfere in behalf of the Cuban slaves.’” (236)

By 1887 Oaksmith expired at the age of 59. The author tells his story artfully and in a manner that—no doubt—undergraduate and graduate students alike will find intriguing.