

Duel of the Ironclads: The Monitor vs. the Virginia

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Review

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O'Brien, Patrick *Duel of the Ironclads: The Monitor vs. the Virginia*. Walker & Company, \$17.95 ISBN 802788424

Offshore dueling

Historical battle introduced to young readers

On May 9, 1862, two vessels faced off against each other in the waters of Virginia's Hampton Roads and proceeded to blast each other with enough shot to sink any other warship in existence. But these two vessels were both covered in plates of iron, so their respective cannon fire did very little damage. As author and illustrator Patrick O'Brien reminds us in **Duel of the Ironclads**, this single meeting between the *Monitor* and the *Virginia* proved to be a turning point in naval history. While neither of these Civil War ironclads could claim victory after the four-hour battle, it was abundantly clear that wooden warships were a thing of the past. It is hard to believe that within a year of being built, and after only the one battle between them, these two famous warships would be destroyed and sunk.

Duel of the Ironclads, aimed at readers between the ages of 6 and 10 years old, tells of the creation of the *Virginia* and the *Monitor*, and their historic battle. The book is a feast for the eyes. The beautiful illustrations, in many cases filling entire pages, clearly dominate the story. O'Brien's detail-filled watercolors make you feel the water pouring into a ship, the impact of vessel colliding with vessel, the grit of exhaust from steam engines, the devastation of fire consuming wooden ships, and the emotions of sailors under fire.

The watercolors also are informational. For example, in a series of five spot paintings, O'Brien conveys how the USS *Merrimack*--one of the Union navy's most powerful sail and steam frigates--was transformed into the CSS *Virginia*, an ironclad ramming vessel. By showing the ship in full sail, to its burning, to its sinking before completely being burned, then to its raising and rebuilding,

readers see how the Merrimack's hull became the foundation upon which the *Virginia* was built. There are also labeled cross-sections of each ironclad, as well as a map of the scene at Hampton Roads that shows the positions of the Union and Confederate ships. The last page of the book includes an afterword with information about the 1973 discovery of the sunken Monitor off the coast of North Carolina.

While the paintings are extraordinary and tell a dramatic tale, the text lacks mention of an important background element to this famous ironclad fight. There is no reference to the Union's strategy of a naval blockade, and the effect that the blockade was having along the East Coast as the first year of the Civil War drew to a close. Patrolling Union ships were having increasing success at shutting off trade to Southern ports. Unable to compete on the same level as the North in building ships to fight one-on-one, the South focused its energies into developing an ironclad to get some relief from the blockade. The untried *Virginia* ultimately sailed into Hampton Roads to take on at least five large wooden Union warships that were part of an extended coastal blockade, while the *Monitor* raced from New York to get there to protect the ships and preserve the blockade--an important part of the ironclads' history.

Meg Chorlian is the editor of COBBLESTONE, the American history magazine for children. She has worked on many Civil War-related issues for COBBLESTONE, including an upcoming January 2004 issue on the Navy in the Civil War.