

### A Country of Our Own: A Novel of the Civil War at Sea

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#### Recommended Citation

Dyja, Thomas (2004) "A Country of Our Own: A Novel of the Civil War at Sea," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss1/9>

## Review

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Winter 2004

**Poyer, David** *A Country of Our Own: A Novel of the Civil War at Sea*. Simon & Schuster, \$25.00 ISBN 684871343

War on the Waves

Novel details battles at sea

If you can use fardage in a sentence, you may well enjoy this book more than the lay reader who will be, sorry to say, left at sea by **A Country of Our Own**, not so much a nautical thriller as a Civil War technothriller. While C.S. Forester and Patrick O'Brien had the skill and grace to not just display but also explain the world of sailing, Poyers, author of nearly two dozen novels, proves his knowledge of the sea by drowning us with terms that remain undefined, rendering this book a useless entrance to a fascinating world.

It is not surprising that Poyers employs jargon in an exclusionary way, as the book itself is exclusionary. The title says it all: **A Country of Our Own**, and those who might not agree with that sentiment—that the Confederate States of America was OUR country—may as well not bother. Maybe Forester and O'Brien had the luxury of writing about wars less morally fraught than our civil war, but they knew that a ship was a universe unto itself and its interest to the reader depended on the depth and color of the characters and the thrill of its action.

**A Country of Our Own** begins promisingly enough, as a pet monkey named Auguste Dupin aims a pistol at our hero, one Ker Custis Claiborne, formerly of the US Navy, but now a member of the nascent Virginia Navy. If only the ape had better aim poor Lt. Claiborne would have been put out of his misery, for he suffers from that Hamlet-like dithering Virginia soil seems to have wrecked upon all its fictional antebellum sons, men whose apparently universal abhorrence of slavery wilted when the Old Dominion made its choice. In volume one, Claiborne, then a U.S. Naval Lieutenant, had a hand in trying to stop a

slaving ship, but he abandoned his command once he heard news of Virginia's decision. This book chronicles his adventures on two Confederate raiders as they burn and plunder in the name of freedom. It is a surprisingly dull business. When not sinking or burning merchant ships, Claiborne and his fellow Confederates rail against the dishonorable tactics of the Yankees trying to sink *them*. I was not sympathetic. Neither Claiborne, nor, it seems, the author, see the hypocrisy of the many impassioned defenses of African slavery next to hearty cries for Confederate liberty from Lincoln's tyrannical yoke.

I'd like to think that Poyer intended the irony when, during a post-shipwreck sojourn in a lifeboat, one of the Confederates hints at cannibalism, even as the racist screeds of Captain Trezevant—Claiborne's mentor as we are told on the flaps—are fresh in the reader's mind. Unfortunately, I have my doubts. Will Claiborne in book three come around to a vision of a nation where all men are created equal? I doubt that too, as long as he comes from the pen of a writer whose two black characters are a Kroo warrior who as he dies looks back to the dark demons of an African past and a snivelling slave named Romulus who passes on his chance for freedom during an interlude with Claiborne in London, saying Where else I belong, Massa Ker?

Could such a sentiment be historically accurate? Of course. We know it's possible some slaves could have felt this way, but when a historical novelist denies dignity to any character who speaks for the opposite of his own position, he is doing something other than bringing history to life. It is not a matter of political correctness to demand perspective and empathy from a novel, be it genre thriller or literary fiction. In **A Country of Our Own**, every Yankee is a pig, cads for mentioning things such as cowardice, treason and forced sex upon slave women. Claiborne challenges foul, even bizarre, pro-slavery rants with nothing more than a sulk, though he is supposed to be theoretically against it in his role as the complicated Virginian. When Claiborne looked at Romulus and wondered what went on inside that nappy skull, I wished this book a hasty end under the waves. While Poyer's battle scenes do read quickly and with verve, the book as a whole wallows under the weight of its politics, ruining what entertainment value it has and making its characters look like asses at the least; at worst, murderous pirates best wished ill.

*Thomas Dyja is author of Play for a Kingdom and Meet John Trow.*