The Voyage of the CSS Shenandoah: A Memorable Cruise

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Life on a Confederate Raider

Timeless and Bound

The Voyage of the CSS Shenandoah is the cruise journal of Lt. William Conway Whittle, Jr., the executive officer (second in command) of the Confederate commerce raider Shenandoah. Lucid and detailed, Whittle's writing illuminates both time-bound details of the Shenandoah's cruise and timeless elements of warship life at sea.

The Shenandoah's story began in September 1864, when Confederate agent James D. Bulloch secretly purchased the full-rigged steamer Sea King in England. In the same way he equipped the famed Alabama, Bulloch sent the Sea King to Madeira to rendezvous with another ship that carried her guns, stores, equipment, and officers. On October 19, 1864, Lt. James Iredell Waddell commissioned the Sea King as the CSS Shenandoah and took command, with Whittle as his executive officer. The newly commissioned raider, with less than a third of the crew she needed, set off into the Atlantic. Her mission was to attack Union seaborne commerce, but especially to destroy the American whaling fleet in the North Pacific Ocean.

Whittle's observations of the Shenandoah's cruise form the bulk of the volume. Through his clear, direct prose, we follow the raider south across the Equator and around the Cape of Good Hope. The description of the ship's stopover in Australia comes from an article Whittle wrote much later, probably due to his caution in removing evidence of the Confederates' violations of the British Foreign Enlistment Act, but his daily entries resumed as Shenandoah made her way to the central and northern Pacific whaling grounds. After
capturing four ships in April and one in May, Shenandoah took twenty-four prizes in a week in late June, wrecking the Union whaling fleet.

Five weeks later, however, Whittle characterized August 2, 1865, as the darkest day of my life. On that day a meeting with the bark Baracouta brought the news that Our dear country has been overrun; our President captured; our armies & navy surrendered; our people subjugated. Further raiding would be mere piracy, and Waddell had to decide what to do with his now stateless ship.

At Waddell's order, Whittle dismounted and stowed the ship's guns and their carriages, and the now-disarmed Shenandoah set course for Cape Horn. After rounding the Horn on September 15, a division appeared between those who supported Waddell's decision to return to England and those who preferred to go instead to the much closer Cape Town. Whittle, as usual, supported Waddell and Shenandoah continued north, arriving in Liverpool on November 6, 1865. There, Waddell turned his ship over to the Royal Navy and hauled down the flag of the last Confederate cruiser.

The extensive introduction provides a review of Whittle's pre-Shenandoah career and a description of the cruise itself, with an overview of warship life during the period that gives the reader the background to understand Whittle's writings. The editors have made excellent use of the relatively abundant contemporary sources on the cruise of the Shenandoah, including letters, diaries, and official logs and correspondence, to supplement Whittle's journal. These alternate viewpoints are especially valuable in assessing the several incidents in which Captain Waddell and his officers were not in accord. Whittle was clearly the buffer between the captain and the wardroom, and the Shenandoah's success was in no small part due to his ability to maintain satisfactory relations without undermining either Waddell's authority or his own.

The diary also illuminates elements of naval life, most notably the relationship between a captain and an executive officer, that appear to be timeless. Although this reviewer's experience as executive officer was separated from Whittle's by 125 years, many of the issues and episodes that appear in Whittle's diary are hauntingly familiar. Whittle mentions, for example, his captain's unwillingness to permit a certain officer to stand watch without supervision and the consequences of that unwillingness—merely changing the name of the officer would move the episode from the 1860s to the 1990s.
Beyond the tensions inherent in his duties, personal and professional considerations increased the difficulty and delicacy of Whittle's position. Besides having promised Waddell's wife that he would not argue with her husband, Whittle had been aide to Flag Officer Samuel Barron, the senior Confederate naval officer in Europe. As such, he knew that Waddell was not the Confederates' first choice to command the Shenandoah. He probably also knew that Bulloch insisted on handpicking Waddell's wardroom officers, and, as the editors note, that Bulloch's instructions to Waddell were significantly more extensive than the instructions given to previous cruiser captains. Whittle's journal displays his growth both as a leader and as a mariner, and after reading a year's worth of his thoughts, the reader takes an interest in him as a person, rather than as the type of a naval officer.

Valuable as it is as an intimate look at a Confederate raider, and enjoyable as it is as a story of adventure at sea, The Voyage of the CSS Shenandoah is not without flaws. The book's greatest failing is its lack of maps. A chart of the Shenandoah's track would be of great value in helping the reader to visualize both the complexity of her cruise and the feat of navigation involved in her passage from the North Pacific to England without sighting land.

At least for this reviewer, it is puzzling that the editors so carefully identified obscure references but left so many personal questions about Whittle unanswered. The fifty-four years between the end of the war and Whittle's death in 1920 occupy some three pages, and in this abbreviated space the opportunity to complete the story of Whittle's life is lost. For example, Whittle mentioned Dear little Pattie K—, my own dear Pattie, with affection and read and reread her letters, but even her last name remains an enigma. Since several Whittle grandchildren furnished papers for the editors' use, Whittle evidently married after the Civil War, but if he did not press his suit with Pattie, who did he marry and when? How did his experiences aboard Shenandoah affect his later life?

Students of the Confederate Navy will want this volume for its detailed observations of an historic, albeit strategically sterile, cruise and its insights into the personnel and operations of the service. For others, it will provide both authentic seagoing adventure and food for thought on the nature of command at sea.

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Oceanic Naval Operations in the Civil War (University of Nebraska Press); Civil War Ironclads: The U.S. Navy and Industrial Mobilization (Johns Hopkins University Press); and USS New Ironsides in the Civil War (Naval Institute Press).