

A Confederate Biography: The Cruise of the CSS Shenandoah

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Review

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Hughes, Dwight S. *A Confederate Biography: The Cruise of the CSS Shenandoah*. Naval Institute Press, 2015 \$17.00 ISBN 9781612511

In *A Confederate Biography* Dwight Sturtevant Hughes chronicles the journey of the cruiser CSS *Shenandoah*: both geographically as it traversed every one of the earth's oceans except the Antarctic, but also emotionally; through the personal, political, and ideological experience of the men who served on her. Hughes quotes the famed captain of the CSS *Alabama* Raphael Semmes on page 1 that "The cruise of a ship is a biography. The ship becomes a personification", the author himself stating that a ship can be "a central character in a life story through which we view more clearly our ancestors, their epoch, and their momentous war". This broader lens beyond the cruise's pure military effect touches such issues as international law and diplomacy, public relations, command relationships, and faith (whether in god, the cause, or even fellow crewmates).

The account is told primarily through the journals and post-war memoirs of *Shenandoah's* chief crew members, including Captain James Waddell and First Lieutenant William Whittle (both defected from the old Navy, Waddell a veteran of over twenty years) and other seaman possessed of strong Southern heritage (the crew contained a descendant of founding father George Mason and cousin of the James Mason detained during the *Trent* Affair; a nephew of Robert E. Lee; and an uncle of Theodore Roosevelt and the half-brother of the British-based naval agent responsible for *Alabama*, James Bulloch). They felt confident that their mission could make a crucial difference. *Alabama's* exploits had not only raised morale in the South, but had earned a reputation the world over. *Shenandoah* might capitalise and build on this, especially when the cruise's objective - the lucrative American pacific whaling fleet - had so far remained largely untouched. The sailors' first hand remembrances are supplemented by use of contemporary newspapers and the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, and the book provides maps which chart *Shenandoah's* circumnavigation of the globe, and diagrams, paintings, and photographs of the ship and crew. The narrative is also enlightened by Hughes' own vast experience of two decades as a Navy

surface warfare officer, including a tour of Vietnam. Here the author superbly describes the technical elements of sailing and ship maintenance required to negotiate the natural dangers, such as extremes of climate and weather conditions, which often posed more of a threat to *Shenandoah's* mission than enemy action.

Prior to this Hughes lays out the profound difficulty the crew had in taking the ship to sea as an effective cruiser to begin with. There was more stringent prosecution of neutrality laws in Britain, resulting from diplomatic friction over previous Southern raiders and attempted rebel purchase of Liverpoolian built ironclad rams. The aforementioned Bulloch had limited options as he “no longer could have a warship built as he had *Florida*, *Alabama*, and the rams; the British would demand proof of ownership by a neutral state.” (16) The new commerce destroyer therefore had to be converted from a commercial steamer and transferred and restowed off of the coast of Portugal to avoid violations of the British Foreign Enlistment Act. This fitting out at sea would be a gargantuan task – leaving Waddell far more to do than the job facing *Alabama* which, as Hughes recounts on page 10, had “looked like a man-of-war, built and configured specially as a cruiser. Semmes had his guns mounted, provisions stowed, and ship in order. His decks had not presented the discouraging and chaotic appearance of *Shenandoah*.”

The theme of foreign relations also permeates one of the most fascinating episodes the book describes, *Shenandoah's* stop-off for repairs and refuelling in Melbourne, Australia. Infuriating to the United States' foreign service, Hughes relays on page 87 the “fierce diplomatic war, barrage of protests and affidavits” that was unleashed between the British colonial Governor Sir Charles H. Darling and the local U.S Consul William Blanchard, who sought to have the vessel detained as a “piratical” and “illegal and criminal rover-of-the-sea.” Here the story of *Shenandoah* in a distant corner of the empire proved to be not just a “microcosm of the Confederate American experience” as Hughes describes it on page 5, but also a microcosm of the broader diplomatic wrangling between London and Washington over perceived British support for the Confederacy.

Through these delicate exchanges Waddell found himself in the unique position of not only playing the role of captain, but also maritime lawyer, diplomatist and Confederate statesman. On one occasion he refused admission to the local constabulary (who were seeking out illegally recruited Melbourne citizens, another violation of the Foreign Enlistment Act) on the grounds that, as a commissioned belligerent warship, the decks of *Shenandoah* represented sovereign Confederate territory. Despite the tensions, the locals and press lapped up the opportunity to witness at first hand a snippet of the distant conflict they had read so much about,

revelling in the fables of the war, particularly, again, those of *Alabama*. Interestingly Waddell – like Semmes before him – appeared only too aware of his obligation to be a publicist and ambassador for Southern nationhood, Hughes on page 84 describing how “Waddell actively courted the newspapers to champion the cause, an unusual exercise in public relations not normally his function.”

Another fascinating aspect of the work is that, ironically, this desire for publicity perhaps influenced Captain Waddell’s decision-making in a more hostile direction too. When arriving off the coast of Australia, a British mail steamer had been present in port and most crew members favoured delaying their approach until the packet departed. This was to avoid the risk of Federal warships being alerted to *Shenandoah*’s whereabouts, the men’s journal entries indicating great consternation with Waddell’s decision to proceed regardless. Hughes however suggests on page 86 that Waddell “might have wanted the world to know that *Shenandoah* was headed for the Pacific.” After all, when *Alabama* had sailed into Singapore “Semmes found twenty-two American ships lying idle in the harbor; he read of others bottled up at Bangkok, Canton, Shanghai, Japan, and the Philippines. With *Alabama* in the area, no shippers would assign cargo to a Yankee vessel. *Shenandoah* could have the same effect in the world’s largest ocean while attacking the last concentration of enemy targets.”

They were successful in carrying the conflict to the far east and beyond, capturing or burning 38 prizes overall (second only to *Alabama*). The book conveys an epic panorama through which *Shenandoah* waged this strangely independent war: across exotic island paradises, ocean tropics, ice fields and arctic mountain ranges; strongly juxtaposed to the common accounts of Civil War combat in the close woods, farmland, and swampy river and coastal regions fought over between 1861-65. The atypical account also illustrates a contrast in the mindset of the protagonists who, so remote from the States and only hearing fragmented outlines of what was taking place there, suffered little of the sunken morale or loss of popular will often argued to have accelerated the South’s collapse. Even on hearing that Richmond had fallen, the resolute crew clung more to the accompanying news that the Confederate government was being relocated to Danville and that Jefferson Davis had issued a rallying cry to the South to continue to resist.

The concluding chapters therefore paint an emotional picture onboard upon learning definitively of Lee’s surrender and the collapse of the Confederate government. When this intelligence became unequivocal (passed on by a British merchant vessel in early August, 1865 - the “darkest day” according to Lieutenant Whittle) harrowing choices had to be made over whether to deliver the vessel to Union authorities and, more disturbingly, whether to surrender

themselves. (186) This was another circumstance in which Waddell faced large-scale disagreement among his subordinates. Settling upon surrender at a neutral port, there was strong opposition to the captain's plan to dock at Liverpool from those who feared the distance to be travelled and heightened risk of capture by the US Navy and an uncertain fate at the hands of the Federals. They petitioned Waddell to land the vessel at Cape Town, South Africa, or even back in Australia at Sydney, the captain again standing firm and returning her to England.

The more affecting aspect of this final period was the torment that the crew went through knowing that the South had been conquered, but unaware of what fate had befallen their loved ones there. They were consoled by impressions that the Yankees were more magnanimous than feared, reaching their destination on 6 November 1865 many months after the last engagement and with the Civil War already fading into memory, at least in Europe. *A Confederate Biography* is thus a poignant window into the (blind) faith of servicemen who did their duty as they conceived it, finally firing the Civil War's last shot on 28 June 1865. This pervading sense of hope of what they might achieve and fear of the great unknown, both at the opposite end of the world and in the stricken homeland they were isolated and divorced from, runs through this compelling story of the expedition of the *Shenandoah*.

Trevor Cox is a visiting lecturer at the University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom where he is currently teaching courses on the American Civil War and Combined Operations in the American Civil War. He is currently producing a book manuscript The American Civil War and the British Imperial Dilemma: How Canadian Confederation was born of the Anglo-American Crises of 1861-1867.