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Captains of the Old Steam Navy: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1840-1880

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morning, bright and clear: Troubridge withdrew—the *Goeben* raced on. Just what he might have accomplished is one of the great “ifs” of history. A few weeks later and thousands of miles to the southwestward, Admiral Craddock, aware of Troubridge’s “failure,” stood to his guns off Coronel, Chile against a modern force and paid dearly for it. (So too did Commodore Harwood’s force off the River Plate, 25 years later. But unlike Craddock, Harwood won.)

What could Troubridge have achieved? Could the fate of Russia—stripped of her major export route by Turkish belligerency—have been said to rest with the *Goeben*? Van der Vat calls upon such formidable witnesses as Barbara Tuchman and W.S. Churchill to support the case, and his case is strong. Would Turkey have gone to war without being propelled into it by “German” naval action against Russia? If not, then perhaps major events in world history do occasionally hinge on small things. That is the appeal of the *Goeben* story and of van der Vat’s engaging book.

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Bradford, James C., ed. *Captains of the Old Steam Navy: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1840-1880*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986. 356pp. \$24.95

Writing history by telling lives can be a risky business. In focusing on individuals rather than themes, events, and trends, history can become

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episodic, anecdotal and fragmented, devoid of any particular meaning, and lacking in intellectual vitality. All too often, inept biographers gather up the fragments of their subject’s life, pile them together in a dreary chronology (birth, childhood, education, work, death) and then present the finished product to the reader as a “revealing portrait of. . . .”

As perilous as full biographies may be, collections of biographical sketches can be even worse. Here, all the sins are compressed into a disjointed mishmash held together by pagination.

That this book avoids this Scylla and Charybdis stands as a testament to the skill of the editor. How many times, in subtle and perhaps not too subtle ways, did Bradford have to remind his authors of their duty to tell a life and, more importantly, to explain what that life meant. How often was it necessary to nudge the authors into placing their subjects within the broader context of 19th century American naval history? However he did it, Bradford did it well. To a degree far greater than is usual in collections of this sort, we have an evenness of treatment and threads of continuity that carry the reader forward.

Following a format set out in his previous collection of officer biographies (*Command Under Sail, 1775-1850*), Bradford presents us with 13 sketches written by appropriate experts. The perennials are all here—Matthew Calbraith Perry, John A. Dahlgren, Matthew Fontaine Maury, Charles Wilkes, Andrew Foote,

Samuel Francis DuPont, David Glasgow Farragut, David Dixon Porter, John Rodgers, Robert W. Shufeldt and Benjamin Franklin Isherwood. In addition to the old standbys, Bradford also includes a couple of surprises—two Confederate officers, Franklin Buchanan and Raphael Semmes. Fortunately, none of the authors lapse into hagiography, and while some may be more critical of their subject than others, for the most part we are presented with sound scholarship and judicious appraisals.

At least three themes emerge: the importance of family, the importance of technology, and the unimportance of the Navy.

No one who is acquainted with the history of the American Navy in the 19th century will be at all surprised at the number of inter-family connections amongst these officers. Since the service was so small, in matters of personal relationships it often more closely resembled a gossipy village than a professional seagoing force. Advancement, thanks to family and friends, was common.

Nearly all of these officers were affected by technology, and none resisted it. To be sure, some were more open and prescient than others, but contrary to conventional wisdom, these aged, whiskered officers were not obstacles to technological advancement.

Just how important was the Navy to 19th century America? Not very. Charting the seas and avenging piratical attacks make for good reading, but they hardly changed the

destiny of the Nation. This is not to say these events ought not to be recorded and celebrated. Indeed, they demonstrate the personal virtue of courage and help us to better understand what good leadership is really about. Nevertheless, in the broad realm of antebellum American history, our Navy did not play a key role.

In the case of the Civil War, of course, the Navy did emerge as an important player, but even here caution is advised. Despite the great claims made for the blockade, recent scholarship suggests that it was hardly decisive. It was on the rivers that the Navy played out its part. It may well turn out that the brown-water navy was more important to the Union victory than its blue-water counterpart.

A third volume in this series is apparently in the works—*Admirals of the Steel Navy, 1880-1930*. Once completed, this naval triptych will provide a ready and welcome addition to the literature of American naval history.

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Boston, Massachusetts

Guttridge, Leonard F. *Icebound: The Jeanette Expedition's Quest for the North Pole*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986. 357pp. \$23.95
Icebound is a long overdue and thoroughly competent presentation of the events surrounding the destruction of the U.S.S. *Jeanette* on 12 June 1881 in the Arctic Ocean north of