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Frank J. Merli. *Great Britain and the Confederate Navy, 1861-1865.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. xxii + 342 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21735-6.

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Aground on the Rocks of Neutrality

Political intrigue, harrowing escapes in the dark of night, covert operatives, battles on the high seas, and chess-like strategy; all the makings of a classic fictional tale. All of these attributes apply equally well to the re-issue of Frank Merli's landmark study of the Confederacy's attempts to build a navy in Great Britain, the Union's efforts to stop them, and the British government's attempts to remain neutral during the American Civil War. This well-researched and quite readable work provides an excellent discussion of the oft underappreciated international aspects of the Civil War.

Chronologically following the Confederacy's attempts to build its foreign navy, Merli introduces the antagonists, and the many issues at hand facing them. He follows the early Confederate exploits and provides exceptional accounts of the actions to keep secret the building of various ships in British ports. Exciting is the escape of the *Alabama* from port under the guise of an afternoon harbor tour and just ahead of the officials sent to impound the ship. No less intriguing are the behind-the-scenes efforts of Confederate ministers to fund and contract for vessels through unscrupulous businesses and less reputable persons. The building of ironclad rams, only to have them seized in the eleventh hour, proved particularly damning to the overall Confederate program. To attempt to describe herein the action and excitement portrayed by Merli's work would be to diminish it. Needless to say, he effectively weaves together the more glamorous activities, such as the *Alabama's* high seas escapades, with the less glamorous but equally important efforts of statesmen and local officials.

Above all else, this is a work about statesmanship and international law. The battles waged in letters and meetings were no less important than the battles being waged with sword and cannon and the generals no less masterful in their skills than the more notable names of Grant and Lee. The preeminent Union statesman Charles Francis Adams, as the appointed Minister to England, remained in constant communication with his British counterpart, the equally adroit Lord John Russell. Adams spent much time reminding the British minister of neutrality laws, the possible impacts of neutrality violations, the benefits of good relationships between Great Britain and the United States, and relaying information about Confederate activities from his network of contacts. Lord Russell and the prime minister, Lord Palmerston, were exceptional British statesmen. In particular, the prime minister understood the short- and long-term ramifications of his government's actions and was talented at understanding the will of his people. Given these abilities, he ably led the British response to events, and when he felt the law was inadequate, he would do what he felt was right, most notably seizing the Laird Rams without complete evidence of their intent. If the success of British neutrality can be measured by the dissatisfaction of both the Union and Confederacy, the British were highly successful since throughout the war, the belligerents constantly believed the British were favoring the other side.

Although the Confederacy's official governmental representatives, George Mason and John Slidell, proved to be lackluster in their positions, Stephen Mallory, Confederate Secretary of the Navy, and James Bulloch, the foreign purchasing agent, both proved to be up to the task of procuring a covert navy overseas. Innovative and intelligent, they had arguably unexpected success given the difficulties and constraints of operating overseas with limited resources and under the probing eyes of governments and spies. It is because of these two men that the Confederacy had any success at all in its foreign endeavors.

In his final synopsis regarding the Confederates' attempts to become a naval power and its possible impact on the war, Merli concludes that the Confederate's overall attempts, even if successful, would not have had a significant impact on the outcome of the war. The *Alabama*

and *Florida* were effective commerce raiders and significantly damaged Union shipping while drawing away Union vessels from blockade duty. However, even if the Confederacy had had a fleet of commerce raiders and chased every Union ship to port, the neutral shipping nations, including Great Britain, were more than willing to take the place of the Union merchant fleet, and very little overall reduction in shipping would have occurred. In regards to ironclad rams, Merli also believed these vessels would have limited impacts. The rams were technically inferior vessels, and the Union capacity to build ironclads far exceeded the South's ability to procure them. The Confederacy's foreign shipbuilding program was most significantly hampered by a lack of funds, poor communications, disjointed organization, and lukewarm support from the highest-ranking Confederate leaders, including President Davis. Finally, the Confederate shipbuilding program in Great Britain was doomed to failure since at no time did the goals of the Confederacy align with the national interests of Great Britain. Both Russell and Palmerston were ever conscious of balancing international law, British law, and neutrality against what would best benefit Great Britain both at the present time and in the future. Although the South hung many of its hopes on foreign intervention and believed that France and England were very near to recognizing the fledgling government, only for a brief instant during the summer of 1862 did the British seriously consider offering to mediate. Recognizing any attempt, however slight, to intervene could cause war between the Union and Great Britain, and given the Confederacy's failure at Antietam and its stance on slavery, Great Britain quickly abandoned any consideration of intervention.

Blockaded and dependent upon foreign deliveries of many sundry items, the Confederacy recognized the need to develop an ocean-going navy. With no real shipbuilding capability at home, the Confederacy turned abroad for its shipbuilding needs. Believing in the power of cotton and close economic and social ties, the Confederacy turned to Great Britain and France. Unfortunately, a concept built upon great hopes and misconceptions soon began to flounder as it ran upon the rocks of the realities of dealing with the national interests of foreign governments and international law. Merli deftly handles these issues with masterful research and insight, and his work is an excellent and recommended addition to the libraries of Civil War enthusiasts and professionals as well as those interested in international law and foreign politics in general.

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