

Peter Kurtz. *Bluejackets in the Blubber Room: A Biography of the William Badger, 1828-1865.*
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Reviewed by Ryan P. Semmes

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Perhaps no work best embodies the nineteenth-century American desire for adventure and struggle with inner turmoil like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Since its publication in 1851, tales of whalers and their voyages around the globe have fascinated readers struck by the brutal, tedious, yet profitable whaling industry of the antebellum period. Many of the American men (as well as men from around the world) who sailed the seas in search of whale oil found themselves aboard warships as the Civil War engulfed the United States of America. In *Bluejackets in the Blubber Room*, Peter Kurtz explores the life, not of sailors, but of a single ship, the *William Badger*. The *Badger*, a 337-ton ship named for its New England shipbuilder, saw service as not only a whaling ship, but also a merchant ship in its first years, as well as a Union naval store ship for the majority of the American Civil War. In his book, Kurtz, a journalist by trade, provides the reader with a fascinating examination of not only New England shipbuilding, maritime trade, and whaling, but also a study of the logistics of maintaining a blockade during the American Civil War.

The *William Badger* was christened in 1828, named for her original master, a famed New England shipbuilder credited with building a hundred ships prior to his death in 1830. The *Badger* began her career as a merchant ship operating

within the "cotton triangle" between New England, the American South, and Europe. Not being aligned with a specific trading company, the *Badger* was an independent merchant ship, or "tramp." Tramps "were the free spirits of the sea," Kurtz writes, "and had enormous flexibility in terms of types of cargo, port destination, and time away at sea" (p. 18). As such, the *Badger* often sailed from port to port looking for the best deal it could find. By 1845, however, the *Badger* was sold to the Lynn Whaling Company, resulting in four multiyear voyages around the world.

Bolstered by excellent use of primary source materials, Kurtz's section on the whaling voyages of the *Badger* is the strongest portion of the book. Utilizing a log book and a journal from the *Badger*'s first two voyages, Kurtz examines the violent, mundane, and lonely days of a whaling voyage. Kurtz also utilizes the log books and journals of other whaling ships to recreate subsequent *Badger* voyages, due in large part to the whaling custom of "gamming," the social gathering of two whaling ships. Crews on both ships swapped stories, news, and often cargo before sailing in different directions. Through the utilization of log books from other ships, Kurtz discovered numerous times that the *Badger* had gammed with other vessels around the world.

The *Badger*'s initial whaling ventures proved successful for its crews and owners. Fishing grounds off the coasts of Africa and Australia brought in large hauls of oil for the crew. Subsequent voyages, however, would yield less fruitful hauls and the *Badger* would change ownership multiple times by the end of the 1850s. As the United States tumbled into civil war, the secretary of the U.S. Navy, Gideon Welles, authorized the "construction, purchase, charters, and conversions" of ships in order to strengthen the weak Union navy (p. 79). Though Welles's brother-in-law, George D. Morgan, was put in charge of the ship-buying program (an action that elicited charges of nepotism against Welles), it was the actions of Morgan's assistant, Commodore S. L. Breese, that would bring about further controversy and charges of embezzlement to the ship-buying program. At the heart of the controversy was the purchase, by Breese's agent, of the *William Badger*.

W. H. Starbuck, "a shadowy shipping agent" hired by Breese to assist in ship purchases, facilitated the purchase of the *Badger* for thousands of dollars less than the price reported to the navy (pp. 81-82). Starbuck perpetrated what Welles described as a "palpable and gross fraud," not only for embezzling thousands of dollars from the government, but also for purchasing ships that were unfit for service (p. 82). By 1861, the *William Badger* was three decades old and showing her age. She required a number of repairs and a new coat of paint before she was officially christened the *USS William Badger*. Her deck was reinforced, a single gun was mounted, and her blubber room was converted to coal storage. For the remainder of the war, the *Badger* would serve as a floating quartermaster's facility, used in support of the blockade of ports on North Carolina's Outer Banks.

Kurtz provides an excellent analysis of the development of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, noting the hierarchy of naval officers

in charge of each division, as well as the hierarchy of ships, including the *USS William Badger*. In chapter 10, Kurtz examines the growth rate of the *Badger*'s muster rolls, focusing particularly on the number of African Americans serving aboard the ship. He notes that early in her service, black sailors were often referred to as "Contrabands," most likely reflecting their status as former slaves from the Outer Banks region. He also provides an analysis of the hierarchy onboard the *Badger*, focusing on the racial division of the ranks, as well as the division between free blacks and former slaves.

The remaining chapters of the book focuses more attention on the blockade in North Carolina. Kurtz does examine controversies surrounding the captain of the *Badger*, Henry P. Carr, in particular focusing on the attempted rape of the captain's daughter by another naval officer, Captain Joshua D. Warren. However, the remaining chapters recount the various naval engagements of the blockade, noting only the *Badger*'s role as a storage ship, used to provide coal and other goods to the ships actively engaged in the blockade. At war's end, the *Badger* was taken out of service and faded from the records of the U.S. Navy (most likely torn apart and sold for scrap).

Bluejackets in the Blubber Room is a fascinating look at the life of a small ship which reinvented herself as the United States did the same. Shifting from merchant ship, to whaler, finally to a wartime naval store-ship, the *William Badger* found herself at times profitable, and at other times unfit for service. Yet this small ship visited ports around the world and ended her career in support of the navy's efforts to restore the Union. Peter Kurtz has written an interesting biography of the *Badger*, one that highlights the growth of the whaling industry in the United States and also examines the administration of the Union blockade during the Civil War. Though seemingly unrelated, the two are connected through the *William Badger*. This ship that once sailed the high seas

became an integral part of the Anaconda Plan that sought to strangle Confederate ports, supplying larger warships with much-needed fuel and food and extending the life of the *William Badger*.

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