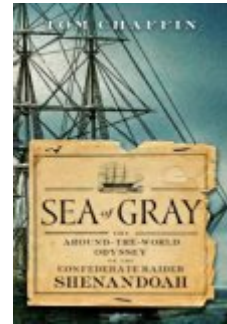


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tom Chaffin. *Sea of Gray: The Around-the-World Odyssey of the Confederate Raider Shenandoah*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2006. xi + 476 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9511-7; \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-8504-0.

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Blume (Department of History, Albany College of Pharmacy)  
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## Rebel of the Deep

According to the cliché, “history is told by the victors”—meaning that our received historical narrative has, in truth, been skewed by those triumphal nations, peoples or empires who have a vested interest in justifying and rationalizing their own past actions. Implicit in that cliché is the notion that the victors will highlight the evil of the vanquished and the dramatic nobility of those who have triumphed.

The historiography of the Confederacy, however, puts a rather different spin on that old cliché. For nearly a century, from Reconstruction to the modern civil rights era, the dominant story of the Old South and the Confederacy emphasized paternalism, gracious nobility, and idealistic (if fatalistic) devotion to states’ rights and liberty. The “Myth of the Lost Cause” is with us today in popular presentations of the story, even if scholarship has become deeper, richer, and more complex and sophisticated.

But the old myths linger on in one subset of Civil War historiography even today: Confederate military history, especially Confederate naval history and the story of the Confederate commerce raiders. The most famous and successful of these vessels was, of course, the *Alabama*, but the last of the raiders, the *Shenandoah*, has a special place in this history. Tom Chaffin’s *Sea of Gray* is the most recent and probably best addition to a long list of volumes on *Shenandoah*’s cruise and, in many ways, it illustrates all the complex issues related to the cruise and historical writing about Confederate commerce raiding.

The basic facts about the *Shenandoah* and her cruise are easily summarized, and Chaffin does an excellent job in pursuing the story even before the beginning and until after the end. The vessel, originally the Scottish steamer *Sea King*, was purchased by the Confederate States of America, refitted in October 1864 as a warship, and rechristened *Shenandoah*. She then began a thirteen-month, 58,000-mile cruise that earned her the distinction of being the only Confederate ship to circumnavigate the globe. In the course of that circumnavigation, the *Shenandoah*’s crew burned thirty-two vessels and ransomed six; took 1,053 prisoners; and, in the end, destroyed vessels and cargoes worth some \$1.4 million. The *Shenandoah*’s captain, James Iredell Waddell, later proudly (and probably correctly) asserted that “the last gun in defense of the South was fired from her deck” (p. 357).

The *Shenandoah*, which came into being shortly after the destruction of the *Alabama* and was viewed by Confederates as the successor to that famous raider, had a clear mission: to search out and destroy the Union’s Arctic whaling fleet. The purpose of that mission, as Chaffin demonstrates through his narrative, was both specific to the moment in the war at which she came into being, and consistent with the purposes of all the Confederate raiders throughout the conflict. For one thing, Confederates hoped that her raiding activities would push exasperated Northerners toward voting for the 1864 Democratic presidential candidate, General George McClellan, who was expected to end the war. In this sense Confed-

erate strategy failed, because Lincoln stuck to both his political and military goals and won a second term.

In addition, Confederates assumed that aggressive threats against Northern shipping would destroy the Northern merchant marine and draw the Union Navy out to the high seas to protect shipping and catch the Confederate raiders—thereby weakening the blockade of the southern coastline. The truth of the matter was that the blockade, porous at the outset, became increasingly effective as the war dragged on. Union strategy continued to focus on strengthening the blockade, and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles resisted Confederate bait by not diverting naval strength into a hopeless oceanic pursuit of Confederate raiders. At one point, Chaffin chastises Welles for a purportedly “lackluster” response to the raiders. But the response—or non-response—was a conscious policy decision. As a number of historians, the present writer included, have argued: the North chose to sacrifice its merchant marine in order to save the Union.[1]

Yet it is also true that the Confederate raiders had their effect on the Northern merchant marine. We need to remember, of course, that the “golden age” of the American merchant marine had already come and gone, and that the American merchant fleet had entered a period of decline that was only exacerbated by events (especially the Confederate raiders) during the Civil War. Nevertheless, Confederate commerce raiding pushed the fleet into a rapid decline comprising both wholesale physical destruction of northern shipping and a panic-stricken “flight from the flag,” a massive transferring of ownership to non-U.S. flags. Although U.S. commerce rebounded in the postbellum period, most of that commerce was not carried in American bottoms—and never was again.

Who or what, then, was to be held accountable for this maritime annihilation? Inexorable historical and macroeconomic forces might be a large part of the answer, but such forces cannot be taken to court, prosecuted, imprisoned, executed, or sued for damages. In the *Alabama* claims, the U.S. government argued that Britain was responsible for ship losses, because the government had failed to prevent Confederate purchases of vessels (that would be converted to warships) within British neutral waters. Meanwhile, Senator Charles Sumner asserted that the British were responsible for over \$2 billion in collateral damages because the commerce raiders had extended the war. A tribunal eventually awarded the U.S. \$15.5 million, but rejected the notion of collateral damages.

But we can also focus on matters of personal responsibility—and the legal and ethical issues related to the actions of the *Shenandoah*'s officers and crew. When the vessel ended her cruise in Liverpool, and British authorities released her officers and crew, Secretary of State William H. Seward protested that the *Shenandoah* was a pirate ship and that those serving on board her were pirates who should be treated as such.

Were they pirates? Almost a century and a half later, authors are still grappling with this dilemma. Throughout much of his narrative, Chaffin tends to avoid taking a stand. What, for example, are we to make of 1st Lt. William C. Whittle's comment as the *Shenandoah*'s men set the *Edward* on fire: “I have rarely seen any thing which is more beautifully grand than a ship burning at sea.” (p.118) Beautifully grand, perhaps, a practical necessity, perhaps, but also morally and ethically obtuse. The *Shenandoah*'s crew methodically burned thirty-two out of their thirty-eight captures; Chaffin meticulously describes each incident yet never stops to speculate about the mindset of Americans who would think of arson as “beautifully grand.”

If ethics and morality are tricky historical topics to assess, what about more “straightforward” matters of law? Despite the old proverb, all is *not* fair in war—or, at least, that has been the general direction of much of the community of nations over the past few centuries. Of particular relevance to the oceanic events of the Civil War, in 1856 the Great Powers of Europe issued the Declaration of Paris in which privateering was proclaimed illegal. The United States refused to sign the declaration—a refusal that the Confederacy, in turn, used as its justification for engaging in an activity that otherwise was illegal.

Do legal “technicalities” matter, therefore? Should they at least be mentioned? Should there not be at least some discussion of the legality of one's activities? For example, on April 1, 1865, the *Shenandoah* encountered four whaling vessels in the harbor of Pohnpei (Ascension) Island in Micronesia. Once Captain Waddell had determined that the vessels were *American* ships—a legal technicality that the captain chose to observe when it was to his advantage—the Confederates arrested the crews, ransacked the vessels, and then torched them. The Confederates had performed this ritual many times, but the remarkable thing in this instance was that the events took place in the harbor of a nonbelligerent port, rather than on the high seas. Were these activities in harmony with generally agreed upon rules of war and interna-

tional law? Chaffin does not raise the question, much less explore it.

On the other hand, Chaffin admits that even the *Shenandoah*'s officers finally began to understand the dicey legal situation they could be in—once they began to accept, in the Spring of 1865, what they had been denying despite multiple reports: that the Confederate States of America had been defeated, and that they, aboard the *Shenandoah*, were operating outside of the aegis of any actual or putative political entity. If they were not engaged in piracy while they flew the flag of a nation struggling for international recognition, could they make that claim now that their flag represented no nation *de facto* or *de jure*? By this time in the narrative, Chaffin suggests that Captain Waddell was aware of the “murky waters” that supposedly constituted the legal status of commerce raiding. But, then, Chaffin suggests that with the fall of the Confederacy the waters became murkier. In truth, the legal status became less murky—no matter how much one might want to find excuses for the actions of the officers and crew of the *Shenandoah*.

On the other hand, Chaffin rightly suggests that Waddell, especially, had begun to realize the truth about his status, and that all the assertions that he made later about his officers' “uncertainty” were largely a method of protecting himself against future criminal charges. On August 2, 1865, for example, the *Shenandoah* encountered the British bark *Barracouta* and received incontrovertible information that finally convinced Waddell and his men that the war was indeed over, and that the Confederacy existed no longer. “Suddenly,” Chaffin writes, “the Confederates' cherished list of destroyed prizes, once such a source of pride, now read like a bill of criminal indictments” (p. 302).

Ultimately, Chaffin allows Captain Waddell to have the last word on this issue. “If privateering, as they still will have it,” Waddell wrote in his memoirs, “was the vice of the Confederates, then the Federals are responsible for having sanctioned it. If it was the one engine of war which harassed them most, then they reaped the penalty of having fabricated it. It is well known that when Europe conspired to put down the system, America refused to divest warfare of one of its most cruel accessories” (p. 367).

Despite Chaffin's blinders with regard to some of these larger issues, his book will be the standard account of this vessel's remarkable cruise. For one thing, since the book, of necessity, focuses on the leadership of Capt. James Iredell Waddell, the narrative becomes, ef-

fectively, a fascinating case study in the nature of leadership and command at sea. When the *Shenandoah* reached Melbourne at the end of January 1865, the ship became a tourist sensation and her officers “the toast of Melbourne” (p. 150). Captain Waddell was toasted, first as the incarnation of Raphael Semmes, commander of the legendary *Alabama*, and then as Semmes's successor.

In truth, as Chaffin's narrative reveals, Waddell was neither. He was a timid autocrat with a penchant for sailing under short sails, a sailor of the old school who had little faith in book learning and thus had a tense relationship with his younger officers—especially his first lieutenant, William Whittle. Indeed, at times he tended to bypass the appropriate chain of command by giving orders himself rather than through his executive officer—in consequence undermining Whittle's authority. In addition, Waddell at times applied harsh discipline at inopportune moments for unnecessary reasons—which tended to damage shipboard morale and create a split among the officers and between the captain and the entire crew. He also, especially during the last half of the cruise, came to be seen by his officers and crew as erratic in behavior.

As Chaffin's narrative demonstrates, Waddell was a man of many contradictions. The captain who at times would bypass his lieutenants and make unilateral arbitrary decisions could, on other occasions, turn decision-making over to his lieutenants for an oligarchical agreement without consensus. Yet this was also the captain who, astonishingly, during much of the cruise never allowed even his lieutenants to know the ship's ultimate destination or, especially in the first third of the cruise, its ultimate mission. This was the timid commander who, apparently, in July 1865 briefly and privately conceived of the idea of staging a nighttime raid on San Francisco.

Ultimately, Chaffin concludes, “Waddell was less Machiavelli, more Hamlet,” a metaphor that misrepresents the Italian theorist of political power and Shakespeare's famous prince of Denmark, even as it captures the essence of the Confederate captain's leadership. As Lt. Francis Chew wrote, toward the end of the cruise when the officers and crew were finally certain that they were returning to England, “I see now why the capt. did not wish to let his destination be known while we were in the Pacific; he did not know himself” (p. 326). But Chaffin is considerably (and justifiably) less charitable about Waddell's post-cruise spin on his leadership of the *Shenandoah*. “Waddell's plainspoken account of his behavior during the cruise,” Chaffin writes, “concealed a

train of vacillations, dissembling, and ill judgments that had, over the past eight months, unraveled shipboard morale on his now suddenly stateless vessel” (p. 306). In short, through the rich detail that Chaffin’s narrative provides, Waddell does not come across as one of the great naval leaders.

Although the *Shenandoah* was not the most famous of the Confederate cruisers, there has nevertheless been a small library of volumes published about her cruise. Master’s mate Cornelius Hunt was the first to publish his version of the story (*The Shenandoah, or The Last Confederate Cruiser*) in 1867. Captain Waddell’s memoirs were discovered in the National Archives and then published for the first time in 1960 with an informative fifty-one-page preface by James D Horan.[2] Lt. William C. Wittle published short versions of the story, and his journal, discovered by his descendants in the 1980s, was finally published in 2005.[3] Over the past six decades, many writers have found the story both interesting to tell and illustrative of Civil War themes. Stanley Horn’s *Gallant Rebel: The Fabulous Cruise of the CSS Shenandoah* (1947) provided a basic overview of the cruise. Murray Morgan’s *Dixie Raider: The Saga of the CSS Shenandoah* (1948) enlarged the picture by tapping into accounts from the crews captured by the *Shenandoah*. Chester Hearn tried to provide an overview of Confederate commerce raiding by profiling eight of the cruisers (*Sumter, Nashville, Florida, Tallahassee, Chickamauga, Alabama, Georgia, and Shenandoah*) in *Raiders of the Sea: How Eight Confederate Warships Destroyed the Union’s High Seas Commerce* (1984). And, more recently, Lynn Schooler’s *The Last Shot: The Incredible Story of the CSS Shenandoah and the True Conclusion of the American Civil War* (2005) offered a popularized “good read” without index or scholarly paraphernalia.

What, then, can Tom Chaffin add to what has already been published? One of the great strengths of *Sea of Gray* is the author’s command of the sources, in all their richness and breadth. Chaffin provides a valuable commentary on the sources and gives pride of place to that remarkable collection of published reports and letters familiar to any of us who sail these historical waters for a living: the thirty-one volume *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (1894-1922). Then there are the treasures to be found in memoirs, published and unpublished; the log books; the diaries by four of *Shenandoah’s* officers; and the vast collection of postwar documents relating to litigation against Britain (*The Alabama\_ Claims*). Finally, of course, Chaffin has devoured the shelves of secondary writing having

to do with Confederate naval history. All in all, Chaffin has mastered the material as no previous writer on the subject has been able to do.

It is because the narrative is thoroughly grounded in these sources that Chaffin’s account of the *Shenandoah’s* cruise is fuller and more complete than any previous account. For example, his use of the officers’ personal diaries enables the narrative to reflect a detailed and nuanced understanding of shipboard life. In addition, Chaffin understands the technical features of the *Shenandoah* and is able to describe and explain them with precision—down to, for example, such unusual features as Cunningham’s Patent Self-Reefing Sails. Indeed, he misses few opportunities to bring the workings of a ship to life, clearly explaining all the functioning of a warship and the positions of her officers and crew—all the basic stuff that will make a novice fully conversant with life at sea, while at the same time engrossing the specialist because of the fluidity of Chaffin’s narrative. Certainly, Chaffin’s narrative effortlessly melds the technical details with human drama and at the same time captures the awe and majesty, isolation and placidity, that marked an around-the-world cruise aboard a ship that could be weeks and months at a time out of sight of land. In particular, for example, Chaffin’s sections describing the *Shenandoah’s* passages through the ice evoke the eerie images of many arctic paintings.

In addition, the narrative is supplemented by good maps and diagrams, a thorough bibliography, and reasonably detailed end notes. An appendix lists all of the *Shenandoah’s* prizes, with date of capture, type of vessel, home port, location of capture, fate of vessel, and the declared value of the vessel and cargo. Finally, there are some nicely-reproduced illustrations (the ships, characters, and events) of the cruise.

The book has and does virtually everything that a specialist or generalist might want and is, at the same time, mercifully free of the kind of small errors that frustrate specialists. One exception comes early in the narrative, when Chaffin overplays the decline of auxiliary steam—and, by implication, suggests that the adoption of oil was a late-nineteenth-century development. But, as I have suggested earlier, my main reservation is that this fascinating and well-told saga tends to be a story taken out of its political and racial contexts. The reader without a good grounding in the broader context will be led to forget just what the ship and its mission represented in the struggle we call the American Civil War. Those who can put the details of the *Shenandoah* into the larger matrix

will find *Sea of Gray* a delicious and revealing narrative.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Kenneth J. Blume, "The Flight from the Flag: The American Government, the British Caribbean, and the American Merchant Marine, 1861-1865," *Civil War History* 32, no. 1 (March 1986), pp. 44-55.

[2]. James Iredell Waddell, *CSS Shenandoah: The Memoirs of Lieutenant Commanding James I. Waddell*, ed.

James D. Horan (New York: Crown Publishers, 1960; reprinted Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, Blue-jacket Books, 1996).

[3]. William C. Whittle, *The Voyage of the CSS. Shenandoah*, intro by D. Alan Harris and Anne B. Harris (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005). Whittle's short account, "Cruise of the Shenandoah," was published in *Southern Historical Papers* (1907) and included as a prologue to the journal in the 2005 volume.

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