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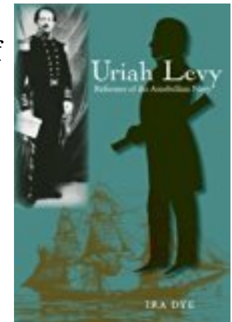
Ira Dye. *Uriah Levy: Reformer of the Antebellum Navy.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. xii + 299 pp. $59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-3004-3.



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Ira Dye's biography of Uriah Phillips Levy (1792-1862) reveals the trials and tribulations of a Jewish naval officer in the antebellum navy. At the outbreak of the American Civil War, he stood alone as the only Jewish officer to achieve the rank of flag officer. But, that alone does not explain the significance of his career. Dye argues that Levy's most lasting contribution was in the area of social reform. "He provided examples on his own ships of how humane treatment of sailors made for better and more efficient operating conditions" (p. 1).

The navy Levy entered in 1812 considered corporal punishment a necessary evil. This was true for both officers and enlisted personnel. By 1838, Levy was using a very different system aboard the U.S. sloop *Vandalia*. The "Regulations and Orders for the Government of the Officers and Crew of the U.S. Ship *Vandalia* U. P. Levy, Commander" reveal that he kept flogging to a minimum, substituting it instead with such lighter forms of punishment as restriction of liberty, extra duties, and solitary confinement (p. 167). As one of his officers noted, "'there was less corporal punishment in the *Vandalia* under captain Levy [than in] any ship I sailed in, except in the *Preble* which I sailed in later'" (p. 174). This made Levy an early reformer, but did not make him popular with his men, many of whom questioned whether such approaches would withstand the test of time, and most of whom had come to expect stern treatment from their superior officers. Throughout the 1840s, Levy remained an outspoken critic of flogging until the naval appropriations bill of 1850 finally outlawed the practice.

Despite the excellent work that historians have produced on social reform in the antebellum navy, until Dye's book, Levy has not been the focus of biographical studies.[1] Dye credits "The Story of a Pugnacious Commodore" by navy doctor Abraham Kanof as the only research to delve into primary sources. The doctor's work, however, was never published, but used in 1942 to dedicate the "Commodore Levy Chapel" at the Norfolk Naval Base (p. 246). Certainly, one of the biggest challenges facing Levy's biographers is the absence of any personal correspondence or manuscript collections. However, Dye does an excellent

job of mining a variety of official sources that mention Levy, including the British naval records at the Pubic Records Office that refer to his capture and imprisonment during the War of 1812.

It is in the official U.S. naval records that Dye finds most information about Levy. Levy maintains the dubious title of being the naval officer brought up on the most number of charges: two courts of inquiry and six courts-martial. These trials provide a sense of Levy's own shortcomings, as well as the importance of wardroom relationships and personal honor to officers of the antebellum navy. In May 1816, Levy accidentally stepped on the foot of Peter Potter while at a crowded ball. The matter was settled in a dawn duel that left Potter mortally wounded (p. 58). Dye contends that "Levy's difficulties in coping with these issues of etiquette, matters that seem trivial to modern Americans, were to blight his future naval career and leave lifetime scars" (p. 57). Time and time again, Levy's outspoken nature proved to be his worst enemy.

If Levy faced difficulty in his personal relationships with other officers, he excelled in the area of practical seamanship. Prior to his entry into the navy, Levy had studied navigation and worked his way up in merchant service to become a captain by the age of nineteen. It was this experience that enabled him to enter the navy as a sailing master, not as a midshipman. This makes his rise through the ranks all the more significant. Dye asserts that "in nearly all cases, becoming a sailing master was an end in itself because there was no promotional potential" (p. 21). In November 1826, Captain Jesse D. Elliott asked Levy to supervise the difficult and dangerous job of replacing the mainmast on the USS *Cyane* in Rio de Janeiro. Also observing the operation was the constitutional emperor of Brazil Dom Pedro I, who offered Levy a position, which he declined, in the Brazilian navy (p. 146). These professional skills and his dedication to the U.S. navy were never in doubt.

In frequent periods ashore, while awaiting assignments, Levy's business and real estate ventures were tremendously successful. Dye speculates that this, too, must have been a source of constant resentment and jealousy among other naval officers and estimates that Levy's assets by 1855 amounted to five hundred thousand dollars (p. 220). He used his fortune not only for personal expenses but also to create a lasting national legacy. In 1832, Levy commissioned the French sculptor P. J. David d'Angers to create a bronze statue of Thomas Jefferson and then presented it to Congress (p. 150). When the Monticello estate came up for sale in 1834, Levy purchased it, along with fourteen slaves, and promptly began a series of extensive renovations (p. 159). Dye gives modern readers insight into Levy's complex nature as well as his enduring contributions to his faith, his service, and his country.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Harold D. Langley, ***Social Reform in the United States Navy: 1798-1862*** (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967); and James E. Valle, ***Rocks and Shoals: Naval Discipline in the Age of Fighting Sail*** (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980).

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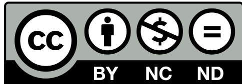

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