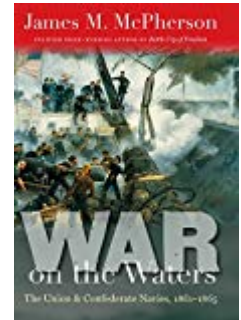


James M. McPherson. *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865.* Littlefield History of the Civil War Era Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. Maps. 277 pp. n.p., cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3588-3.



Reviewed by Charles Wexler

Published on H-CivWar (June, 2015)

Commissioned by Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz (Eastern Illinois University)

The US Navy and its role in the Civil War has received increased attention from Civil War historians. Robert Browning's 2005 book *Success Is All That Was Expected: The South Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War*, for example, reveals valuable insights into operations along the Confederate coastline, and Craig Symonds's 2012 study *The Civil War at Sea* provides a contextual overview of the conflict. It is in this increasing swell of literature that James M. McPherson wrote *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865*. Although the title suggests a balanced look, McPherson predominantly focuses on how the Union navy contributed to the overarching war effort.

McPherson's introduction outlines two key tenets that governed the direction of this operational narrative. He articulates that the war itself could be broken down into "five overlapping parts": "a first wave of Union victories in 1861-62, successful Confederate resistance in 1862-63, a revival of Northern momentum in the latter half of 1863, Confederate resuscitation in early 1864, and

final Union triumph from the second half of 1864 through the end of the war" (p. 2). He also believes that the Union navy more directly contributed to the Northern strategy than its Confederate brethren. This fact informs his decision to invest most of his writing toward the Union navy. By highlighting its accomplishments, McPherson demonstrates that the Union navy deserves more credit than others have previously assumed.

McPherson accomplishes this through a linear progression of the war in an eleven-chapter narrative that details the operations of both the Union and Confederate navies. The first chapter mentions the ways in which both sides mobilized for war and the decisions of April 1861. This includes backgrounds on Union Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, his Confederate counterpart Stephen Mallory, the sailors in each navy, and early policy decisions about Confederate privateering. He then follows this in his second chapter with the creation of the Union blockade in the second half of 1861; the capture of Port Royal; and the *Trent* affair of November 8, 1861, where

Union Captain Charles Wilkes boarded the British steamer *Trent* and apprehended Confederate envoys James Mason and John Slidell on their way to Europe. In the next two chapters, McPherson focuses on developments along the Mississippi River into late spring 1862 before returning to the Atlantic in chapter 5 to look at the Peninsula Campaign and foreign-built Confederate commerce raiders. The upside of this approach is that it deemphasizes the Battle of Hampton Roads and instead highlights greater naval contributions to the war, such as the capture of New Orleans, Forts Henry and Donelson, and Port Royal, South Carolina. However, a downside is that McPherson does not successfully connect Confederate defensive efforts in New Orleans, Memphis, and Virginia as part of a larger strategy, particularly Mallory's domestic construction program.

Throughout his book, McPherson relies on his extensive Civil War background and previous readings to flesh out his analysis. He specifically draws on the papers of David Farragut and David Dixon Porter, but his remaining sources are either printed primary sources or existing manuscripts. This allows McPherson to write an easily accessible text driven by operations and key commanders. Both Farragut and Porter feature predominantly throughout, which is unsurprising given their impact along the Mississippi River and later campaigns, such as Farragut's victory at the Battle of Mobile Bay in August 1864 or Farragut and Porter's involvement in the January 1865 capture of Fort Fisher near Wilmington, North Carolina. McPherson wisely moves beyond these two and highlights other major naval figures, including Samuel Du Pont of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, Samuel Phillips Lee from the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, and Confederate agent James Bulloch. Through these officials, McPherson highlights the international perspective of the war at sea. He discusses the exploits of the British-built Confederate commerce raiders *Florida*, *Alabama*, and *Shenandoah* and notes how these vessels forced American merchants to

register their vessels in foreign countries to avoid capture or destruction.

One major way the navy contributed to the war effort came through coastal and riverine operations against Confederate targets. Beginning with the August 1861 capture of Fort Hatteras in North Carolina, naval commanders achieved major victories that aided the war effort, including New Orleans. The navy also participated in joint operations with local army units. McPherson highlights, for example, a combined operation against Brownsville, Texas, in November 1863 to restrict trade across the Rio Grande from Mexico. While he rightly downplays the significance of the Brownsville occupation in the larger scheme of the war, the Brownsville expedition demonstrates how these forces worked together throughout the war. Naval support for army units on shore had a direct impact on Union victories, including Forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee, Vicksburg, and Fort Fisher outside Wilmington, North Carolina.

Outside of naval campaigns, McPherson devotes a significant portion of his book to the Union blockade of the Confederate coastline and its emergence as the navy's primary mission throughout the war. Abraham Lincoln's April 1861 declaration of the coastal blockade took months to become effective as the navy required sufficient ships and a forward base to maintain operations off major Confederate ports and smaller rivers and inlets. Du Pont's November 1861 capture of Port Royal provided the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron a forward base situated between Savannah and Charleston to allow their ships to remain on station without returning North for resupply. The acquisition and construction of new steam-powered warships also aided with blockade maintenance and allowed Du Pont and other commanders the ability to occupy the numerous smaller inlets that litter the Confederate coastline. Despite these provisions, Confederate forces regularly ran the blockade and brought in much-needed supplies. McPherson asserts that

of the near 1,300 attempts to either export cotton or import war material, about 1,000 ships made it through. The blockade, however, significantly reduced cotton exports and Southern merchants could not reap the benefit of higher prices due to increased shipping expenses and inflation. This in turn significantly weakened the Confederate economy and in McPherson's mind had a direct impact on Confederate ironclad construction as well as railroad maintenance.

McPherson's emphasis on recounting Northern naval significance unfortunately results in an unbalanced work that does not fully reflect the book's title. He underrepresents the Confederate navy throughout the book, particularly domestic Confederate naval construction. He briefly mentions the rise of Confederate naval defenses in New Orleans and the Virginia conversion of the USS *Merrimack* into the CSS *Virginia*, but neglects to mention how similar developments shaped defensive preparations in other locations. A brief section on Confederate defensive preparations in Charleston would have substantially strengthened his treatment of the multiple campaigns against the South Carolina port. He instead intersperses content concerning Charleston across multiple sections within several chapters. This makes the text difficult to follow at times, particularly if someone is not knowledgeable about Civil War chronology. The complexity of the war at sea does not easily lend itself to a brief narrative, and in the process some subjects receive only a brief retelling. McPherson deserves credit for trying to cover many different topics within a relatively short text but needed to elaborate more on the Confederate navy.

In *War on the Waters*, McPherson highlights the growing importance of naval history within the voluminous Civil War historiography. Whether from the blockade or other operations, he successfully demonstrates the navy's importance to the Union victory in 1865. Although the book contains notable flaws, McPherson accom-

plishes his stated goal throughout his brief narrative. The book introduces the different ways both navies affected proceedings and can ultimately serve as a gateway for others interested in the larger war at sea.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Charles Wexler. Review of McPherson, James M. *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42054>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.