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# Piracy and the English Government, 1616-1642

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yet the crew of the *Alabama* consisted almost entirely of Englishmen. Also, Semmes probably lied about having no knowledge of the *Kearsarge's* chain armor before leading the *Alabama* into battle with the Union warship. Semmes's greatest flaws were his pride and his arrogance, but he did remarkably well with the *Alabama's* drunken, mutinous, desertion-prone crew, whose actions reinforced his view of sailors as lazy and morally corrupt.

But several errors of fact mar Taylor's otherwise admirable book. For instance, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles was not "abysmally ignorant of naval matters" in 1861 as Taylor declares, and Captain Franklin Buchanan of the CSS *Virginia* sent two Union vessels to the bottom at Hampton Roads, belying Taylor's statement that "in defeating the *Hatteras* [Semmes] became the only Confederate captain to sink an enemy warship." In providing background for the decision to fight the *Kearsarge*, Taylor states that Semmes "knew little of the destructive potential of Winslow's eleven-inch guns." This is doubtful. The eleven-inch Dahlgren had appeared onboard U.S. Navy ships in the late 1850s and on the eve of the Civil War enjoyed a reputation in the service as the world's most powerful naval cannon. Several other such errors, a few typos, the absence of a bibliography, and the lack of a map showing the routes of Semmes's cruises also detract from the book.

These matters aside, Taylor has done a fine job. Not only does he include all the color and romance one would expect in a biography of Semmes, but he also answers the most significant questions

surrounding him. The "critical factor" in Semmes's decision to fight the *Kearsarge* was his "aggressive personality." As for commerce raiding, Semmes believed that if Confederate cruisers could sufficiently damage the U.S. merchant marine, the North's shipping interest would force Lincoln to sue for peace. The fact that commerce raiding had little effect on the North's war-making potential was not only "irrelevant" but also "by no means clear" at the time. "If the war could be won by embarrassing the government in Washington," concludes Taylor, "the Confederate cruisers were every bit as successful as Jeb Stuart's cavalymen and John Mosby's raiders."

In sum, Taylor's splendid book is the definitive biography of Raphael Semmes.

ROBERT J. SCHNELLER, JR.  
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Hebb, David Delison. *Piracy and the English Government, 1616-1642*. Studies in Naval History. Aldershot, U.K.: Scolar Press, and Brookfield, Vt.: Ashfield Publishing, 1994. 303pp. \$69.95

Piracy was a major problem for England in the early seventeenth century. While some might have characterized England as a nation of pirates, it was more true to say that English merchants, particularly those trading in the Mediterranean, were victims of piracy. English ships were not the lone targets, however; piracy had become a general problem, and the major threat was from the North African states. In 1616, Algiers

had even broken out of the Mediterranean Sea and launched an attack on Santa Maria in the Azores, kidnapping hundreds of the island's inhabitants. In this early period, the Navy and the nation were not yet organized in ways that were responsive to a type of threat that has become commonplace in our modern world.

This historical study provides insight into the difficult process that the English government went through, as king, council, and ministers worked with the Navy to organize an effective response. In 1621 a naval expedition under Sir Robert Mansell sailed against Algiers, but it accomplished little except to demonstrate that such problems were not easily solved. Mansell's attempt employed a flawed strategy, lacked a well focused tactical objective, and was improperly supplied.

Problems with piracy continued to increase, and the government next tried diplomacy rather than force to achieve its object. The famous diplomat Sir Thomas Roe undertook an embassy to the Ottoman Empire, attempting to use Turkish pressure on its client states in North Africa to negotiate the release of captured Englishmen. Eventually, he was able to negotiate a temporary peace on the payment of a moderate bribe and arrange for the release of some 240 Englishmen from captivity.

In the 1630s a new threat arose when Sallee became the center of piratical activity, as it threw off whatever restraint had been in place from the Ottoman sultan and Morocco. The government in London turned once again to naval force and sent an expedition under Captain

William Rainsborough. Better equipped than Mansell by virtue of a recent naval expansion, Rainsborough was completely successful, forcing the surrender of Sallee and the release of three hundred prisoners.

Hebb's fascinating account illustrates the evolutionary development of the English government as it began to refine its approach and management, linking diplomacy, naval administration, and naval operations to deal with a serious foreign policy issue. The solutions were transitory but showed marks of later, more mature development. His examination of this subject has made an interesting contribution to English naval history.

Readers of this journal will also be particularly interested in a further point that Hebb makes. Pages 107-122 constitute a detailed critique of Sir Julian Corbett's study of the Mansell expedition of 1621, presented in Corbett's two-volume study, *England in the Mediterranean* (1904). Carefully re-examining the evidence that Corbett used, Hebb determines that an important part of Corbett's conclusions was unjustified. In this specific case, Hebb shows that the pressing strategic problem that Germany presented to England at the time that Corbett wrote inadvertently shaped and colored Corbett's interpretation. "To make the past serve the present, he had first to remake the past," Hebb concludes.

Hebb's work will interest present-day readers for its resonance with recent world events. It makes an important contribution to history, not only for the new material that Hebb brings to light but also for his well founded revisionist

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views and his evaluation of Corbett's historical work in one particular instance.

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Levathes, Louise. *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-33*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994. 252pp. \$23

Between 1405 and 1433 Admiral Zheng He of China led seven trading and flag-showing voyages for the Ming emperor Zhu Di through the East Indies to India, the Persian Gulf, and the East Coast of Africa. Zheng He's fleets were truly remarkable, with as many as three hundred vessels, nearly thirty thousand men, and a four-hundred-foot-long, seven-masted flagship—nearly five times the waterline of Columbus's *Santa Maria*. (By any measure of distance and size, these voyages surpassed those of Columbus.) Yet in 1434 the entire enterprise collapsed abruptly, leaving little trace or impact. Sixty years before Columbus, China withdrew from world commerce, leaving it to the Europeans.

Louise Levathes, a former visiting scholar at Nanjing University in China, has done a timely and scholarly service in recounting Zheng He's voyages, basing her work on original manuscripts in China. The subject of which she writes so well is little known to the ordinary student of maritime affairs, grounded (as is this reviewer) in Western maritime history. As China begins again to assert itself in world

trade and maritime affairs, Levathes's work is especially timely, reminding us that China is not a newcomer to the world stage.

There are two parallel themes in her book, both equally interesting. The first covers details of the seven voyages and of court life in the Ming dynasty. There existed a richness that is scarcely imaginable today. Silk, pearls, tea, wine, hardwoods, iron, spices, and herbs were carried and traded from China to Africa. Court life was elaborate, ritualized, and more brutal than the Medici at their height. Levathes describes all these with an eye for detail that would be the envy of the keenest society reporter.

The second theme, and the most important and interesting to the readers of this journal, is the economic and political significance of the voyages. Although the expeditions were a heavy draw on China's resources, the emperor supported them to demonstrate to China's neighbors near and far the power and majesty of Zhu Di's reign. Elaborate presents were exchanged with local rulers along the way, by which they acknowledged their position as vassals of the emperor in far China. Commemorative tablets were placed, many of which survive today, to testify to the reach of the emperor. Not infrequently Zheng He entered into local civil wars, placing on their thrones rulers who were thus beholden to the emperor. This was showing the flag, and presence, on a grand scale.

The most important part of Levathes's work is her analysis of why the later emperors and palace cliques so abruptly terminated these voyages and