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Book Review: Symonds, Craig L. The Civil War at Sea

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Craig L. Symonds is a retired professor of American history and currently resides as the Chairman of the history department of the United States Naval Academy. He was educated at the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of Florida. He is the author of eight books on the Civil War and is highly qualified to write on the subject matter. The author’s background enhances his credibility as a scholar. Symonds’s *The Civil War at Sea* examines the development of warships in the Civil War. Northern and Southern navies alike designed ironclads and steam-powered ships for combat. Symonds focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of each side’s ability to create warships, illustrates specific battles and charts the Northern blockade.

In the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, a transportation and communication revolution invaded America and boosted railroad production, canal construction, and the U.S. Navy’s ship building capabilities. In 1843, the USS *Princeton*, the world’s first propeller-driven steam warship was constructed by the U.S. Navy. However, this did not necessarily advance the U.S. Navy’s merit. They were still inferior to the power of Great Britain (4-5). Symonds nevertheless believes the U.S. Navy was more prepared for war in 1861 because of the construction of twenty-four propeller-driven steamers armed with advanced naval ordinance (8). Lawrence Lee Hewitt concurs that the abundance of northern resources served as a catalyst to fight a naval war and eventually cut off Confederate supply routes. The Confederacy sought to fight the war on land and feared that “extensive naval preparations in time to meet the dangers that threaten us are impracticable.” Those U.S. Navy members who committed themselves to the Confederacy following secession implied the best defense was constructing small flotillas that would “serve as auxiliaries to forts” (16). The South took advantage of the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, Virginia and the Bellona Gun Foundry on the James River. The Bellona Gun Foundry produced over a thousand heavy guns for the Confederacy. The Naval Gun Foundry at Selma, Alabama became another source for naval guns as well (18). The North’s naval efforts are better organized, better funded and more successful because the North receives heavy support from congress (33). Symonds uses the battle of the *Monitor* and *Merrimack* to show the advancement of the U.S. Navy. Despite immense damage, the Union’s *Monitor* prevailed, allowing their Navy to remain in control of Hampton Roads, Virginia (32). Symonds provides a persuasive argument regarding how the North

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was better prepared for such a naval war, not only from this example, but how the Union obeyed Lincoln’s plan for a southern blockade, as discussed below.

According to Symonds, the Union’s strategy was to seal off the entire southern coast to trade and prevent the entrance and exit of vessels (42). Therefore, the South was not able to import the supplies the Confederacy desperately needed. Due to the Union blockade, the profit of southern cotton exports fell 90 percent (70). Perhaps the most destructive product of the blockade was the collapse of the southern railroad system. Raimando Luraghi claims that this was “The most deadly cause of the dearth that starved soldiers on the front line” (69). A slow asphyxiation of cotton sales and railroad destruction led to the Union occupation of southern ports and the eventual surrender of Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia (72).

For the latter half of the work, Symonds discusses the importance of the capture of rivers and harbors for both North and South. During the war, rivers were important because they allowed for the movement of troops and supplies. Union gunboats, which were faster and better equipped vessels than the Confederate counterparts, guarded transport ships and controlled much of the Mississippi River (109-110). This was not an easy task, according to Symonds, and the Confederacy, despite limitations, was able to produce two gunboats to attempt the defense of Charleston Harbor at Fort Sumter and Mobile (153). On August 17, 1863, Union naval forces began a bombardment of Battery Wagner and Fort Sumter. The Confederate Navy was not able to defend itself, which allowed the Union to take control of the forts. The only challenge they would face was the H. L. Hunley, a Confederate submarine. Symonds delves into only one battle between the H. L. Hunley and the USS Housatanic, in which the Hunley sank the Housatanic outside of Charleston Harbor (176). Symonds does not illustrate fully the importance of the H. L. Hunley’s role in the Confederate Navy. With the coming Union occupation of Mobile Bay in 1864, the Confederacy’s river war efforts are stifled and focus transferred back to ground battles in the western theater (192).

The work struggles to convey its place in Civil War historiography. Symond’s creates a chronological synopsis of water wars with no clear relation to the Civil War as a whole. As historian Stephen W. Sears points out, Symond’s description of Confederate commerce raiders such as the CSS Florida, Alabama, and the Shenandoah, fails to prove their effect on the war. However, the book is friendly to those without knowledge of the Civil War.

Tess Evans

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As the subtitle suggests, Daniel Walker Howe’s *What Hath God Wrought* is a work that examines the rapid transformation of the United States of America from 1815 to 1848. At 855 pages, it is a comprehensive narrative that encompasses virtually every facet of history imaginable: political, legal, diplomatic, military, technological, economic, social, and cultural. Though Howe asserts that his narrative has no thesis, the book contains at the very least an interpretive framework in which people, events, and places are threaded together by an overarching theme (849). The author rejects the notion advanced by other historians—most notably Charles G. Sellers—that this time period is defined by a “market revolution” by referencing more recent scholarship that counters that a market economy had already been in existence since the colonial era. Rather, Howe argues that it was a “communications revolution”—often coupled with the transportation revolution—that distinguished the period under examination from any other in American history. This premise of a communications revolution thus provides the overarching theme present throughout the work.

The very dates 1815 and 1848—the conclusions of the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War respectively—are specifically chosen to emphasize the dizzying evolution that communications underwent over the course of three decades. In early 1815, the Battle of New Orleans was needlessly fought because the participants on this side of the Atlantic were oblivious of the fact that diplomats representing the United States and Great Britain had already signed the Treaty of Ghent, thus bringing the war to an end in the twilight of 1814. Howe contrasts this chronic dilemma against his dramatic narration of the first message sent via electric telegraph by Professor Samuel F. B. Morse in Washington D.C. to his associate in Baltimore in 1844. Acutely aware that his invention was going to revolutionize not only the speed of communications but even divorce communications from the necessity of transportation, Morse sent his profoundly metaphysical statement, “What Hath God Wrought” (1). In illuminating just how momentous this event truly was, Howe observed that “Neither Alexander the Great nor Benjamin Franklin … two thousand years later knew anything faster than a galloping horse. Now, instant long-distance communication became a practical reality” (1). Indeed, the author asserts that the establishment and operation of the early telegraph lines kept the Polk administration and American public informed of developments once war broke out against Mexico.
While the electric telegraph was arguably the most advanced development in the communications revolution, it was by no means the only significant one. Howe is at his finest when examining the expansion of the nation’s postal service with all its far-reaching consequences. The expansion of the postal system provides a unique example of the complementary nature of the transportation and communications revolutions. Howe observes:

Not only did improved transportation benefit communication, but the communication system helped improve transportation. Even without a central plan, the post office pushed for improvements in transportation facilities and patronized them financially when they came. The same stagecoaches that carried passengers along the turnpikes also carried the mail, and the postmaster general constantly pressed the stages to improve their service (226).

While the newspaper boom of the era was in some measure the product of recent modernization in printing and papermaking—yet another factor of the communications revolution that Howe examines—it was the burgeoning postal system that facilitated the spread of information by delivering newspapers throughout the nation. Nor was this limited to newspapers alone. Magazines, books, and other printed material were delivered by the postal service, allowing readers to become more knowledgeable about the world in which they lived.

Howe convincingly demonstrates throughout his work that the communications revolution truly did transform society. The proliferation of political newspapers and periodicals both informed the voters and promoted their involvement. This is especially evident in Howe’s examination of America’s second party system. Faster communications revolutionized the world of trade and commerce as well. Perhaps most notable is the boost that reform movements received from the communications revolution. Howe argues that it is no coincidence that the antislavery movement became more prominent in the 1830s. Supporters of this movement were also taking advantage of the new printing technology to get the word out. Howe even astutely notes a global consequence of the communications revolution that undoubtedly benefited the abolitionist movement: “In a world where people communicated and traveled, the continued existence of slavery in the United States when many other countries had abolished it came to seem anomalous and embarrassing” (647). These are but a few examples of the transformation of American society facilitated by improved communications.

Despite its great insight, What Hath God Wrought is not without
its flaws. Regrettably, the most notable shortcoming of this book is the lack of any adequate examination of the advantage in communications that the United States held over Mexico during the Mexican-American War or how such a cutting edge influenced the outcome of the conflict. While the chapter pertaining to this war addresses how the technological superiority of the U.S. military and the chronic political instability of the Mexican government proved to be decisive factors in America’s favor, little is said about the disparity between each nation’s communications system. Given Howe’s assertion that the telegraph kept America well informed during the war (as previously noted) along with his statement that Mexico’s inefficient communication system left its northern territories vulnerable to an ever expanding United States, it is not unreasonable for the reader to expect a detailed discussion on the specific role of the telegraph and its influence on the course of events (21). However, little is said on the subject. Howe merely states that the war served as a catalyst for extending the telegraph system to facilitate the federal government’s need for the latest news from the front (748).

Daniel Walker Howe’s What Hath God Wrought is a superb work of scholarship on the early national period, despite minor flaws, and is highly recommended for several reasons. Undoubtedly, his novel interpretation of a communications revolution as the main force behind the transformation of the early American republic is welcome because it will continue to spark healthy debate among historians. Such debates often sharpen the intellectual tools of the trade, thus making better historians out of the discipline’s professionals. However, the scholar is by no means the only one who stands to benefit from reading Howe’s work. Because of its eloquent narrative prose, any general reader unfamiliar with the time period now has access to a comprehensive wealth of information contained in a single volume. Howe is to be applauded for attempting to educate not only the scholar but also the general public. His refreshingly balanced opinion that, “History is made both from the bottom up and from the top down, and historians must take account of both in telling their stories,” serves as a reminder that all areas of history are valuable and must be examined in relation to each other for a more complete understanding of the past (843). In light of all these considerations, it is only fitting that Howe’s What Hath God Wrought belongs in the same series as James McPherson’s renowned Battle Cry of Freedom.

A. Blake Denton